

Foreign Language Acquisition and Context

A study of English language learning and use in the Russian context.

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Abstract

Foreign language acquisition has been assuming greater importance over the recent decades due to the global processes taking place in the world. It is, therefore, significant to more fully understand the factors that facilitate or hinder the process of foreign language acquisition. It is argued that context figures prominently in foreign language acquisition and the relationship between foreign language acquisition and context is explored. The English language has been chosen due to the abundance of data on a variety of factors that influence acquisition of English as a foreign language. A qualitative research strategy is employed to explore the learners' perspective on the activity. Data are represented from four schools with different characteristics to compare and assess the influence of various factors. Grounded theory is used to analyse the data in a systematic way. Foreign language acquisition is viewed as involving two types of activities: learning activity and use activity. The analysis shows that learning activity and use activity are different in nature and that different levels and aspects of context are pertinent to each of these activities. The importance of transition from learning activity to use activity is stressed.

Keywords: Foreign language acquisition; English language learning; English language use; Context; Capital; Activity; Qualitative research.

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Declaration

I declare that, “Foreign Language Acquisition and Context: A Study of English Language Learning and Use in the Russian context” is my own work which has not been submitted before for any degree or examination to this university or any other institution. All the sources that I have used and quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged as complete reference.

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Abbreviations

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
MESRF	Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation
Rosstat	Federal Service of State Statistics of the Russian Federation
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
RIA Novosti	Russian News and Information Agency
WEF	World Economic Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Significance of the study

Foreign language acquisition has been assuming ever greater importance over the recent decades due to the significant changes taking place in the world.

First and foremost, globalization has impacted on various spheres and permeated different levels of life. With political and economic activities that transcend national borders (Jones 2000), new technologies that connect people, fast means of travelling that carry people over long distances, and growing migration and tourism, the issue of communication in a foreign language has acquired utmost importance.

Furthermore, development of computer technologies and the expansion of the Internet have extremely intensified the circulation of information and knowledge. It has also become possible to communicate unlimitedly with people from all over the world. These factors contribute to the growing importance of foreign language proficiency as well.

For the time being it is English that is the international language for communication in business, diplomacy, sport, science, technology and countless other fields. However, in many cases people might be in greater need of other foreign languages than English. This might also imply that one foreign language will not suffice.

In this context a more detailed understanding of the process of foreign language acquisition is of crucial importance. It is also significant to study what factors facilitate or hinder this process.

1.2. Problem statement

There is little comparative data on the level of foreign language proficiency in different countries. However, the country context seems to have an impact on the overall level of foreign language proficiency of the country's population. According to the survey of English language knowledge and skills of students at the end of lower secondary education in eight European countries (Bonnet et al. 2004), students in some countries demonstrated significantly better knowledge and skills of the English language than students in the other countries. It appears that some contexts are more favourable or stimulating for foreign language learning than others.

I would argue that context is an important agent in the process of foreign language acquisition. Consequently, it is impossible to comprehend the outcome of this process unless we study closely the context. And, conversely, it is impossible to explain why specific features of the context produce certain effects unless we study the particularities of the foreign language acquisition process.

1.3. Research questions

The objective of foreign language acquisition is proficiency in a foreign language which involves both extensive knowledge and developed skills. Further, it is characteristic of foreign language proficiency that unless the knowledge and skills are maintained, the level of proficiency is most likely to decline. Therefore, application of the acquired knowledge and skills is not only the aim of foreign language learning but a necessary condition to keep the level of proficiency. Moreover, application of knowledge and skills parallel with foreign language learning favorably contributes to the development of proficiency in a foreign language. Besides, when a person applies foreign language knowledge and skills in a variety of activities, a certain amount of learning always takes place.

This suggests that the study of foreign language acquisition should not be reduced to foreign language learning activity, but should also include foreign language use activity¹ as an important part of it.

It is, however, noteworthy that learning activity and use activity are very different in their nature. Moreover, I suggest that context impacts these activities in a different way.

The study will therefore address the following research questions:

1. What is the context for foreign/English language learning and use in Russia?
2. How is the context perceived by the learners of the English language?
3. In what way does the context influence foreign language acquisition?
4. What is the difference between foreign language learning activity and foreign language use activity?
5. What are the characteristics of these activities?
6. What factors facilitate or hinder these activities?
7. Which level of context is most salient for each of these activities?

These research questions are aimed to investigate the complex relationship between foreign language acquisition and context. To answer these questions both the context and the activity aimed at foreign language acquisition will be thoroughly examined. The learners' perspective and experiences will be devoted special attention. I hope that answering these questions will help move from description of foreign language learning and use in a certain context to explanation of the specific character of foreign language learning and use in the particular context.

¹Since many authors use such word combinations as *language learning* and *language use*, e.g. Ó Riagáin (1997), Van Lier (2000), I will use the same word combination when discussing activity bound with foreign language: *foreign language learning activity* and *foreign language use activity*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. A shift of focus in foreign language acquisition research

Much of the earlier research on second/foreign language acquisition focused on the linguistic aspect of the language acquisition, and was psycholinguistic in orientation. However, over time more attention has been given to social factors that influence the process of acquisition, and the research has adopted a sociolinguistic perspective (Ellis 1994).

Nowadays foreign language learning is looked upon as situated in social processes with vast connections to political, cultural, psychological, cognitive, and interactional processes.

However, there still seem to be little research on the nature of relationship of context and foreign language acquisition. Thus, Van Lier, who is the advocate of an ecological way of researching, practising, and conceptualizing language learning, suggests the use of new approaches that pay special attention to the environment of the learner. He argues that:

“... the learner is immersed in an environment full of potential meanings. These meanings become available gradually as the learner acts and interacts within and with this environment.” (2000:246)

It is noteworthy that the environment is not limited to the formal language learning context. In addition, van Lier emphasizes the active role of the learner in “dealing with the world and its meanings” (op. cit.).

This view goes in line with theorizing about social practice, human agent and human activity that has its roots in the Marxist tradition and is elaborated in the works of Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1977), Leont’ev (1978), etc. Thus, Leont’ev, in his reflection on the relationship of activity and context, wrote:

“Under whatever kind of conditions and forms human activity takes place, whatever kind of structure it assumes, it must not be considered as isolated from social relations, from the life of society. In all of its distinctness, the activity of the human individual represents a system included in the system of relationships of society. Outside these relationships human activity simply does not exist.” (1978:51)

The same pertains to learning activity, which is one of the forms of human activity. Hence, according to the theory of social practice, learning is defined as:

“...relations among people in activity in, within, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world.” (Lave and Wenger 1991:51)

It can be concluded that the study of foreign language acquisition cannot be divorced from the study of context. Moreover, it is crucial to study different aspects and levels of the context in order to understand its impact on foreign language acquisition activity.

However, bearing in mind that the focus of the research is foreign language acquisition of school students, which means that their learning activity is to a great extent shaped by the school context, I cannot leave out the issues related to language policy, which educational language policy is a part of. In what follows, I will outline how language policy is defined in the literature. I will then consider the influence of language policy on foreign language learning and use.

2.2. Language policy and language planning

Language policy is a part of state policy that deals with a variety of issues such as establishing one or more official languages, regulating the use of national and minority languages, defining which variant of the language should be used as a standard and what languages should be taught in education (Philipson 2003). Thus, language policy has a lot to do with the choices among languages or variety of languages.

However, some authors understand language policy in broader terms. Spolsky (2005:2152) argues that language policy “includes not just the regular patterns of choice, but also beliefs about choices and the values of varieties and of variants, and also, most saliently, the efforts made by some to change the choices and beliefs of others.” Accordingly, Spolsky (op. cit., 2154) distinguishes the following three areas within language policy:

- language practices;
- language beliefs and ideology;
- explicit policies and plans resulting from language management or planning activities that attempt to modify the practices and ideologies of a community.

Spolsky uses the term *management* to define deliberate action aimed at manipulation of language situation. While others (e.g. Kaplan and Baldauf 1997; Liddicoat and Baldauf 2008) prefer to use the term *language planning*. They describe language planning as a complex process that is directed by language policy and is most evident at the governmental level, but in fact takes place at other levels of society as well, involving in this process various agencies, pressure groups, and individuals. More importantly, Liddicoat and Baldauf argue that:

“Language planning work in local contexts is a fundamental and integrated part of the overall language planning process, which merits attention both within the context of the operation of macro-level planning as a necessary extension of it – and in its own right – as a local activity with no macro roots.” (2008:4)

Thus, they highlight the importance of studying the way language planning operates on the micro-level in order to more fully understand the complex process of language planning.

Cooper develops this idea and proposes “to include decisions by small-scale units such as individual schools, workplaces, churches, and families as instances of language planning” (1989:38). To my mind, this view on the language planning process enables us to get a more nuanced understanding of dynamics of linguistic processes on different levels, interaction of these levels and predict possible outcomes of language policies.

2.3. Can language policy succeed?

There are numerous accounts of the failures of language policies, and even more so, according to Spolsky, “there are comparatively few cases where language management has produced its intended results” (2004:223).

There might be different reasons for this state of affairs. We can suspect the policy for flaws and examine the way it has been implemented. Romaine (2002) notes that weak linkages between language policy, planning, implementation and evaluation prevent language policies from producing the intended results.

However, here we can pose a question of the actual potential of language policy to influence the language situation, including foreign language acquisition. Ó Riagáin argues that: “...policies in economic, social, educational, and regional planning sectors are rarely assessed for their impact on language patterns, yet it is probable that, in total, their consequences for language objectives are profound and of more importance than the language policies themselves” (1997:170-171). It means that the context in which the language policy is carried out has a decisive influence on its outcome.

Some scientists go further and state that those language policies which are considered effective are in fact either sanction the actual linguistic patterns or act in congruence with the forces that are altering language patterns (Carrington 1993, Gardner 2000). These arguments point to the importance of determining the factors that have a salient effect on a language situation and examining the way they operate in a particular context.

Schiffman (1996) emphasizes that it is congruence of language policy with sociolinguistic “grass-roots” reality that to a great degree determines the chances of success for a specific language policy. From this follows that we should devote particular attention to people whom the language policy is directed at.

Likewise, Romaine states that: “Any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitude of those likely to be affected” (2002:208).

Carrying this line of thought further, Wright contends that: “Only speakers can decide or not whether they will use a language” (2004:250). And while Wright acknowledges the fact that people act under the influence of various factors, she claims that it is the speakers who “are always the final arbiters of whether a language survives or not” (op. cit.).

These comments have a direct bearing on the focus of my research that is foreign language acquisition from the perspective of the learners. And I strongly believe that it is essential to study the way people perceive the context in order to understand how it impacts the process of foreign language acquisition.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Context

The traditional way of looking upon foreign language learning as acquisition of certain amount of knowledge and skills within the prescribed time, with a particular focus on efficiency and assessment, cannot account for variation in the level of foreign language proficiency of learners in different countries. Neither can it fully explain the variation in the learning activity among the learners within the same context.

Therefore, it is crucial to study the learner's activity as situated in the context with a special attention to the influence of specific characteristics of the context on the learner's perception and action.

I adhere to Bronfenbrenner's view that examination of human interaction should not be "limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject" (1979:21). Inspired by his way of looking at the structure of the context as "the complex of nested, interconnected systems" (op. cit., 8), I intend to study the influence of different levels of the context on foreign language acquisition:

- world context;
- country context;
- town context;
- school context;
- classroom context;
- peer context;
- family context.

On the other hand, it is impossible to comprehend the influence of the context, unless we look closer at the structure and development of human activity, which foreign language acquisition activity is a form of.

3.2. Activity theory

In order to explore the way students acquire a foreign language, I am going to employ Leont'ev's activity theory which provides a useful framework for the analysis of human activity and helps deepen our understanding of the process of foreign language acquisition.

Leont'ev (1978) argues that any activity originates as a response to a certain need of a person. In order to satisfy this need, a person directs his/her activity at a specific object. Importantly, the object of an activity is a distinctive feature that differentiates one activity from another.

Furthermore, according to Leont'ev, "the object of an activity is its true motive" (op. cit., 62). He underscores that:

"Activity does not exist without a motive; 'non-motivated' activity is not activity without a motive but activity with a subjectively and objectively hidden motive." (op. cit., 62-63)

Thus, in order to understand what kind of activity a person is carrying out, it is crucial to find out what the motive of the activity is.

Further, Leont'ev argues that activities are realized through actions:

"Human activity does not exist except in the form of action or a chain of actions. For example, work activity exists in work actions, school activity in school actions, social activity in actions (acts) of society, etc." (op. cit., 64)

Action is defined as a goal-directed process. And while motive functions as an incentive to the action, the direction of the action is determined by the goal.

The difference between activity and action is that the object of the action does not coincide with the motive. For example, a person who wants to learn a foreign language has to carry out a series of actions: learn the alphabet, learn to read, learn words, learn grammar rules, etc. As

we can see the motive of the activity, i.e. learning a foreign language, differs from the objects of the actions.

It is necessary to note here that “the same activity can be realized through different actions” (Lantolf 2000:9). Thus, one and the same activity, e.g. learning a foreign language, can be performed in different ways.

On the other hand, “what appear to be the same actions can be linked to different motives and, thus, constitute different activities” (op. cit., 9). It means that while students do the same tasks, they might have different motives underlying their actions. For instance, some students perform the learning activity in order to complete the study course rather than master the language.

The important point about goal formation is that it emerges as a result of a conscious process when a person links the object of the action to the motive of the activity. It implies that a person is an active agent who can significantly influence the results of actions. As Lantolf has expressed it in relation to learning activity: “[students] play a major role in shaping the goal and ultimate outcomes of tasks set for them by their teachers” (op. cit., 13). This statement might be very helpful in creating a more detailed understanding of the factors that impact the learning process.

However, the goals are never set independently from the surrounding context. As Leont’ev has put it: “They are given in objective circumstances” (1978:65). From this I can assume that studying the motives and goals of the students engaged in the learning activity might shed light on the meaning that the students attach to foreign language learning and foreign language competence in their specific context and in this way understand how the context impacts foreign language acquisition of the students.

As regards meaning, in other words perception of the foreign language by students, it refers not only to the spheres where the language can be applied but also to the aspired value of foreign language knowledge and skills. Bourdieu’s concept of capital provides an illuminating way of examining the value accorded to a foreign language in the specific context.

3.3. Capital

Bourdieu defines capital as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its “incorporated,” embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (1986:241).

He distinguishes between different forms of capital:

- economic capital (e.g. money, property);
- cultural capital (e.g. knowledge, skills, academic degrees, attitudes);
- social capital (“the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (op. cit., 248));
- symbolic capital (e.g. prestige, honour);
- linguistic capital (linguistic competence appropriate to a certain context (Bourdieu, 1991)).

It should be noted that one form of capital can be converted into another (Bourdieu, 1986), for example, cultural capital into economic capital.

Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that:

“... the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices.”
(1986:241)

This quote clearly demonstrates the important role of the context in defining the possibilities for realization of certain types of capital.

Returning to the focus of the research, I would argue that language, as any other commodity, can be acquired with the purpose of obtaining profit, i.e. realization of certain types of capital. From this it follows that the concept of capital might be very helpful in understanding the relationship between the context and foreign language acquisition of a student.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will argue for the choice of the research strategy and design. I will then explain the logic which underlies the selection of the population and the sites for the research. Furthermore, I will discuss the appropriateness of the data collection method I have used, and explain the sampling approach that helped optimize the collection of data. This will be followed by the data collection and analysis procedures. In addition, the issue of validity will be addressed. I will also deal with ethical considerations that cannot be ignored when the research is centred around human beings. The remainder of the chapter will consider the limitations of the study.

4.1. Research strategy

Bryman points out that qualitative/quantitative distinction goes beyond “the presence or absence of quantification” (2008:22) in the collection and analysis of data. He argues that one of the major differences between these two research strategies is in the nature of the relationship between theory and research (op. cit.). Thus, qualitative research is defined as a strategy that:

“predominantly emphasizes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, in which the emphasis is placed on the generation of theories” (op. cit., 22).

Due to the fact that the interest of this study is to examine human activity, namely, foreign language acquisition, and understand its relationship with the context, in other words, to explore the phenomenon in a variety of its aspects, a qualitative research strategy in the best way possible suits the main objective of the research. Moreover, the focus on the learners’ experiences of the foreign language acquisition process is another ground in favour of qualitative research strategy (Marshall and Rossman 1994).

4.2. Research design

The next key decision that had to be made was about the research design. According to Bryman:

“... we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasting cases or situations” (2008:58).

Therefore, cases with different characteristics could provide data to explore the effect of different factors on the process of foreign language acquisition and effectively contribute to developing theoretical ideas. This argument served as rationale for the choice of a comparative design.

4.3. Selection of population and sites

The choice of the English language learners for the study of the foreign language acquisition process was motivated by several factors. Firstly, even though it is a Foreign Language, not the English language, that is a compulsory subject at Russian schools, which means that students can choose among foreign languages taught at school, there is a growing tendency in favour of the English language. Consequently, there was a high probability of obtaining rich data on factors that make a foreign language attractive for learning. Secondly, due to the fact that interest in learning the English language is largely caused by an influence outside the school context, there was an opportunity to explore the influence of various contexts on foreign language acquisition. Sampling did not present any difficulty because of a large number of English language learners. Lastly, taking into account that internationally English is recognized as a lingua franca, it was important to examine the effect of the country, town contexts on its use so that to compare the perception of the English language as a lingua franca and the activity aimed at English language learning and use conditioned by the country

context, the town context, the school context, etc. This could help deepen the understanding of the factors that cause variation in English language proficiency in different countries.

Furthermore, the decision to locate the study in a city other than the capital of Russia was based on the assumption that one might expect somewhat more extensive use of foreign languages, including English, in such cities like Moscow, Saint Petersburg, etc. in comparison with other cities in Russia. On the other hand, proximity of the city in question to Moscow ensured that the participants of the research had been to Moscow and could account for the possible differences in the contexts. It should be noted that one third of the urban population of Russia lives in cities with 100-499,9 thousand inhabitants (Rosstat 2011), and the city where the research took place falls into this category.

Urban population according to the number of inhabitants¹

	The number of towns and urban settlements	The number of inhabitants, (thou. persons)
	2009	2009
Total number	2417	103690
less than 3	362	631
3-4,9	320	1283
5-9,9	564	4047
10-19,9	475	6629
20-49,9	376	12127
50-99,9	156	10889
100-499,9	129	27042
500-999,9	24	15388
1 mln. and more	11	25655

Concerning the choice of schools it was significant to select schools with different characteristics that might have an impact on foreign language acquisition. The typical case sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was employed for the first two schools which were chosen on the basis of statistical data and consultations with knowledgeable informants. However, there might have been a difference in teaching methods since the teacher of the students from school A had been awarded the title of the Meritorious Teacher, which is an honorary title for

¹Rosstat (2011): *Urban population according to the number of inhabitants*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 5 November, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/demo12.htm

exceptional achievements in the teaching profession.

The third school chosen for the research was among the best schools in the city (according to the rating of schools on the basis of compulsory graduation exam results). Moreover, it follows an advanced foreign language learning curriculum. It means that English language learning starts from the first year of schooling (compared to the standard curriculum where foreign language learning normally starts from the second year of schooling), the number of lessons per week is more than in an ordinary school (e.g. in the last year of school – 5 lessons instead of usual 3). Besides, intensive methods and specialized materials are used.

The fourth school was chosen due to the fact that it specializes in ICT studies, that is, it has a prolonged and more extensive curriculum in this subject. Moreover there are more computers in the school in comparison with other schools. Consequently, the students have better knowledge of the Internet resources, better skills and better access.

The decision to interview the students in the last year of schooling (16-17 years) was taken in accordance with two considerations. Firstly, the students of this age have already accumulated extensive knowledge of the context outside immediate social relations and hence can account of the influence of different levels of the context. Secondly, they have the highest level of proficiency in comparison with students of lower grades, which means that they have more capability to perform various kinds of activities in a foreign language.

4.4. Data collection method

According to Marshall and Rossman: “The methods planned for data collection should be related to the type of information sought” (1994:104). From this it follows that appropriateness of methods for the stated research questions is of critical importance.

Due to the fact that the object of the research was not the level of foreign language proficiency, and not even the amount of foreign language use, but the nature of the activities bound with foreign language learning and use, the variety of their forms, and the factors that facilitate or hinder these activities, the only way to obtain the necessary data was to interview the learners. Thus, in-depth interview has become the major data collection method of the research.

However, in order to understand the influence of the context, substantial information on historical, political and socio-cultural processes has been gathered, statistical sources have been employed, and related documents analysed.

4.5. Sampling

Bryman (2008) notes that purposive sampling is one of the most often used sampling approaches in qualitative research. In this case “the researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research questions” (op. cit., 458).

Being interested in different perspectives on learning a foreign language, different involvement in the learning activity and different forms of use activity, I felt it important to talk to students with different achievement levels. Consequently, discussing with teachers who among students could participate in the research, I stressed that it was not my aim to talk with the best students but rather with students who have different levels of proficiency.

However, it was critical to select the students who were talkative and self-confident to secure rich and deep data in spite of the limited time, what is more, in a conversation with a person who is a stranger to them.

4.6. Data collection procedures

4.6.1. Entering the field

Gaining access to the site is a critical factor for data collection that should not be disregarded while planning a research project. Since I had contact with one of the schools from before and had retained links with it, I did not encounter any difficulties in getting permission to conduct research there. I got in touch with another school in advance to make sure that entry would be possible.

The necessity to carry out research in the other two schools emerged in the process of data collection due to the employment of a theoretical sampling approach, that is, “selecting further interviewees on the basis of emerging theoretical focus” (Bryman 2008:459).

Therefore, I had to try to get access to schools without preliminary agreements. At the same time it was a good opportunity to check chances of getting access to schools and possible difficulties a researcher might face.

I had a letter from the University confirming that I was doing fieldwork as a part of a Master’s degree thesis. In one case I talked to the principal of the school, in the other with the vice-principal. After I had introduced myself and explained the purpose of my research I got permission to conduct research in both schools.

In a case when the research is not sensitive for either teacher or students (e.g. is not aimed at evaluating students’ skills), and the age of students is 16-17 years when they can themselves decide if they want to participate in the research, it seems to be easier to get access to a school.

It is also necessary to note that the teachers and other staff members in all the schools were extremely helpful in providing me with all the necessary information and a place to conduct the interviews.

4.6.2. Interview guide

Bryman (2008) underscores the importance of being flexible when interviewing as a part of qualitative research. It implies that following the interviewee's line of thought, the researcher might not only change the sequence of questions but also ask "questions that are not included in the guide" (op. cit., 438). This has proved to be a very useful approach for grasping the learner's perspective on foreign language acquisition, locating his/her interests, and obtaining rich, detailed data on foreign language learning and use activities.

However, preference was given to the semi-structured interview rather than unstructured for there were certain topics that should have been covered. Hence, an interview guide containing a set of open-ended questions was devised.

Furthermore, according to Patton, "the guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive" (2002:343), consequently, it allows collecting the necessary data for conducting analysis within the framework of comparative design.

4.6.3. Building trust

It was crucial to establish trusting relationship with the participants of the research since it could significantly enhance data collection. Before starting the interview I explained to the students why I was conducting the research (as a part of my Master's thesis), what had made me interested in this topic (my previous education), and what was the purpose of the research (to explore the factors that influence foreign language acquisition). I emphasized that the information I would get was very important. Moreover, I guaranteed the participants of the research anonymity and confidentiality of the acquired information.

4.6.4. Audio-recording

I adhere to Bryman's view when he argues that:

"... because the interviewer is supposed to be highly alert to what is being said – following up interesting points made, prompting and probing where necessary,

drawing attention to any inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers – it is best if he or she is not distracted by having to concentrate on getting down notes on what is said.” (2008:451)

From this it follows that audio-recording acquires significant importance in qualitative research.

There is one more point I would like to stress. Due to the evolving nature of qualitative research, the researcher might not be aware of the significance of certain aspects of the data. Audio-recording, however, allows preserving all the data for further thinking, analysing, and most probably getting new insights.

4.7. Data analysis procedures

Grounded theory which “has become by far the most widely used framework for analysing qualitative data” (Bryman 2008:541), in the best way possible suited the objective of the research, that is, to explore the phenomenon in a systematic way, discover relevant categories and establish relationship among them.

The book *Basics of Qualitative Research* by Strauss and Corbin (1990) turned out to be extremely helpful in learning how to apply this approach since it provided a detailed description of the successive stages of the process, accompanied by numerous examples. Thus, breaking the data through *open coding* helped see the meaning of the data and learn to recognize the concepts pertaining to foreign language acquisition activity. Whereas, putting data back together in *selective coding* helped create a more detailed understanding of the process of foreign language acquisition activity.

4.8. Validity

Brock-Utne (1996) argues that validity is a more important criterion for the evaluation of qualitative research than reliability. It should be then noted that techniques built in the grounded theory approach significantly enhance the validity of the findings. Furthermore, the application of comparative design also contributes to the credibility of findings (Silverman 2010).

4.9. Ethical considerations

Although there was little risk that the research could in any way harm the participants, still every participant was offered to read the information letter which explained the voluntary nature of participation in the research and was asked to sign an informed consent form.

Furthermore, the research did not touch upon sensitive areas and did not explore the questions related to private life of the participants. However, certain measures aimed at data protection were taken, among them (Bryman 2008):

- keeping the list with the names of the participants in a secure place;
- using identifier codes on the transcripts;
- employing fictitious names for reporting the research;
- ensuring that any information which could identify the person do not get into the research record, etc.

4.10. Limitations

I would like to focus on two major limitations of the study. The first has to do with the level of proficiency of the researcher, and the second with the limited time allocated for the fieldwork.

When doing research for the first time it is almost impossible to avoid mistakes while conducting interviews. The reason for this is that a person is unlikely to develop interviewing skills by learning interviewing in theory. Besides, it takes considerable time to become a good interviewer.

Furthermore, it took time to learn data analysis techniques, thus, analysis of the data started not in the beginning of data collection as, for example, Silverman (2010) recommends, but at a later stage.

Finally, time is often an issue in conducting fieldwork because arranging and conducting interviews take considerable time. Thus, it happened that instead of transcribing and coding parallel to data collection there was only time for keeping notes and listening to parts of the interviews. Besides, time did not permit to meet with learners more than once.

5. FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN RUSSIA

5.1. Historical, political and socio-cultural background

Adhering to the ontological position of constructionism which “embodies a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals’ creation” (Bryman 2008:22), I am positive that individuals play an active role in construction of social reality. However, I am convinced that the role of social reality should not be disregarded. A person’s perception of some social phenomenon and its meaning is formed under the influence of the environment s/he is living in. Moreover, social order might act as a quite powerful constraint on people’s actions. Therefore, in order to explore peoples’ perspectives and activity it is crucial to know the environment they live in. A historical, political, economic and socio-cultural outline of the country might serve as a reference point for understanding people’s statements and experiences.

It should be noted that the environment surrounding people is very complex as it consists of multiple domains that impact a person on different levels and in various degrees. The influence of these domains on foreign language learning and use will be discussed later in this paper, while here I would try to point out those facts which are, to my mind, most salient and helpful in understanding the specific language situation in Russia in respect to foreign language learning and use.

The transformations in internal and foreign policy of Russia that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century had a crucial impact on all spheres of life in the country and on the image of the country in the world. The political system that had existed for almost 70 years was not capable to overcome the deep economic and social crisis that affected the country in the eighties. The new policy proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 was aimed at solving the socio-economic problems and at a reformation of the political system. Gradually the transformation processes led not only to the change of the economic model but to the replacement of the political system as a whole (Shestakov 2008).

From the single-party political system dominated by the Communist Party advocating socialist Marxist-Leninist ideology the country turned into a presidential-parliamentary republic with multi-party democracy (Constitution of the Russian Federation 1993). This change had a direct influence on the social consciousness of the people as they got the opportunity to openly express their opinion and to actively participate in the life of the country. Thus, there appeared conditions for the formation of civil society.

The systemic economic crisis of the eighties was conditioned by low labour productivity, slowdown in the rates of industrial output, inability to keep pace with the scientific and technological progress, and heavy dependence on the prices for exported raw materials (Kuznetsova and Shapkin 2002). At that time the country had a centralized planned economy with a huge bureaucratic apparatus. The economic reforms which aimed at improving the situation in the country were liberal in nature and ultimately led the country to a market economy.

However, due to the inconsistent policy, the transition to a new economic model was compounded by a series of economic crises with a severe drop in production output, considerable budget deficit and huge foreign debt.

This had a direct influence on the social conditions of life in the country. High inflation rates, delays in wage payment or non-payment impaired the welfare of the people. Curtailing the system of social services and public health care was among the reasons that led to the reduction of life span (Shestakov 2008). Furthermore, since 1991 the death rate has been exceeding the birth rate (Rosstat 2010), resulting in a demographic crisis which in its turn might have a negative effect on further socio-economic development of the country (Decree of the President 2007).

The economic reforms aimed at privatization of the state property had a crucial effect on the social sphere in the country. Razuvaeva (2009) argues that the most distinct feature of privatization in Russia was poor organization of the whole process from the juridical point of view. The way it was conducted prevented the wider population to participate in privatization. As a result, the national wealth passed into the hands of a comparatively small group of people. The structure of the social classes was transformed. The gap between the very rich

and the very poor widened. Moreover, as an effect of the introduction of market economy, those with more material resources got much better opportunities in life which resulted in a larger social stratification in the society.

Furthermore, instability in the country during the transformation period caused an increase in crime rate. Among the reasons for the increased crime rate tendency, Andrienko and Arend (2002) mention the decline in the living standards, poverty, social inequality and the spread of a hidden economy. The period was characterized by a high level of organized criminal activity and a marked increase in crimes within the economic sphere. It is noteworthy that corruption is still mentioned as the most problematic factor for doing business in the country (World Economic Forum 2010:286).

The changes that have taken place in Russia within this period could not but affect the status of the country in the world and attitude to it. However, political processes which took place in the foreign policy had even more tremendous consequences. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and democratic revolutions in the Eastern-European countries in 1989-90s led to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The end of the Cold War led to the reduction of nuclear weapons and helped alleviate tension in the world but at the same time brought radical changes to the system of international relations. Russia has retained an influential position in the world community but lost its status as a superpower.

Changes in the political climate made the countries look for new ways of international cooperation. In regard to Russia, the process of integration in the world economy has been slowed down by the economic situation in the country and power relationship in the world. Thus, for example, Russia has been negotiating entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) for 18 years. And only now the process seems to have approached its final stage (WTO 2011).

Furthermore, Russia is still isolated to a considerable degree due to the visa regime with the European Union. The Kremlin, however, is convinced that visa-free travel between Russia and the EU will have a positive effect on economic relations with other countries and on the amount of contacts of Russian people with people from other countries, and has made the introduction of a visa-free regime its foreign policy priority (RIA Novosti 2011).

In comparison with the time of the Soviet Union, nowadays Russian people have got much more opportunities for travelling, studying and working abroad. However, the analysis of statistical data (Rosstat 2011) on the scope of international business in Russia and foreign travel of the Russian citizens might help to understand the actual demand for foreign language knowledge and its possible use.

I assume that people who work in the international organizations might have more opportunities to use their foreign language knowledge and skills. However, if we compare the number of people who are involved in this kind of business, with the population of the Russian Federation, we will see that these people constitute a very small portion of the population.

Organizations with foreign capital participation¹

	Number of organizations		Average number of employees (excluding outside dual jobholders), thou. persons	
	2005	2009	2005	2009
Total	12418	12396	2918	3179
The resident population of Russia, mln			143.5	141.9

It should be taken into account that there are many organizations and firms in Russia that collaborate with foreign partners. But I suppose that in this case contacts that might require foreign language knowledge would be reduced to those people who are responsible for keeping the contacts and, besides, such communication would be limited in time.

Another opportunity to use a foreign language is either to communicate with foreigners who come to Russia or to travel abroad.

¹Compiled on the basis of the tables from Rosstat:

Rosstat (2010): *Russia in Figures. Resident population*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b10_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/05-01.htm

Rosstat (2011): *Russia in Figures. Basic indicators of organizations with foreign capital participation by kinds of economic activities*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b11_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/13-08.htm

Arrivals of foreign citizens from far abroad countries to the Russian Federation and departures of Russian citizens to far abroad countries¹⁾ (by purpose of travel)¹

(thou. of visits)

	Number of trips of foreign citizens to Russia ²⁾					Number of trips of Russian citizens abroad ³⁾				
	1995	2000	2005	2009	2010	1995	2000	2005	2009	2010
Total	5311	7410	9398	8361	8266	8396	9819	14838	21641	25487
of which by purpose of travel:										
business	2186	1997	2591	2755	3035	1696	1611	1864	1043	1133
tourism	1787	2215	2251	2000	2025	2555	4252	6405	9192	12231
private	544	2239	3516	2663	2174	2925	2867	5149	9881	10188
transit	84	90	148	61	49	-	-	-	-	-
service staff ⁴⁾	710	869	892	883	983	1220	1089	1420	1526	1936

¹⁾ Hereinafter data of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (Frontier Service).

²⁾ Excluding those arrived for permanent live.

³⁾ Excluding those left Russia for permanent live and military personnel.

⁴⁾ Drivers of motor vehicles and crews of sea and river ships, aircraft and railway transport crews.

We can see that the number of foreigners arriving to Russia has not significantly increased through the years and is still small at the present time. It is interesting that most foreigners arrive from Finland, Estonia, China, Lithuania, Germany and Latvia (Rosstat 2011, Table 4.2). Some of these countries are former Soviet Republics. Arguably, many people coming from these countries might speak Russian. As for Germany, I can justifiably assume that a certain amount of tourists from Germany might in fact be former Russian citizens, since migration to Germany has constituted approximately half of the total migration from Russia to far abroad countries (Rosstat 2011, Table 4.3).

Traveling abroad is naturally bound with considerable expenses which many people could not and still can not afford. For example, in 2004-2005 there were 25 million people who received an income less than the subsistence level, which made seventeen per cent of the total population (Rosstat 2010).

¹⁾ Rosstat (2011): *Russia in Figures. Trips of Foreign Citizens to Russia and Russian Citizens abroad by purpose of travel*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b11_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/10-12.htm

Population with money incomes below subsistence minimum level¹

(mln. persons)

	1992	1995	2000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	49.3	36.5	42.3	25.2	25.2	21.5	18.7	18.9	18.5
percentage of the total population	33.5	24.8	29.0	17.6	17.7	15.2	13.3	13.4	13.1
percentage as of the previous year	...	110.9	84.9	86.0	87.7	85.3	87.0	101.1	97.9

Furthermore, not every kind of tourism requires foreign language knowledge. If people travel in organized groups, which is a common way of travelling for many Russian tourists, they spend most of the time with each other and a guide, hence, do not have much contact with local people in a foreign country. Not least important is where people go and on what purpose. Half of the people who travel to far abroad countries have tourism as a purpose of their trip (Rosstat 2011, Table 4.4). Besides, most of them go to Turkey and Egypt where Russian people do not need foreign language knowledge, because in the majority of cases service personnel can speak some Russian.

Finally, I would like to mention *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011* published by the World Economic Forum (WEF). The report presents data on 139 countries. The countries are ranked according to Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index which “aims to measure the factors and policies that make it attractive to develop the T&T sector in different countries” (WEF 2011:xiv). According to this report, Russia is ranked 59th place (op. cit., 320) which is rather eloquent evidence that there is still room for improvement in this sphere.

Summing up what has been said above, it can be concluded that Russia is still undergoing a transition period characterized by economic instability, an imperfect legal framework, and various problems within the social sphere. Hopefully, the country will become attractive for foreign business and tourists, and Russian people will not only be able to travel abroad due to the free-visa regime, but will have financial means for it.

¹Rosstat (2010): *Russia in Figures. Main Socio-economic Indicators of Living Standard of Population*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b10_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/07-01.htm

As far as foreign languages is concerned, the current situation in Russia does not provide conditions for extensive use of foreign languages by the people of the country and hence does not make foreign language knowledge an objective necessity. The fact that the interest to learn foreign languages has increased testifies to the fact that the situation is changing. However it will take time before the vast majority of Russian people will not only realize the importance of foreign language knowledge but will get real opportunities to apply their knowledge in variety of fields.

The picture would be incomplete without understanding what position the state takes towards foreign language knowledge and use and what are the goals of the foreign language policy in the country.

5.2. Foreign language policy in Russia

Due to the fact that states do not exist in isolation, and what is more, the processes of globalization make relations between states ever more complex, national policies become more and more interconnected and influenced by tendencies within the world community. Thus, in relation to language issues the state has to take decisions not only about local languages but foreign languages as well.

However, it is not a simple question. Since in many states the national language, along with other symbols such as flag and anthem, is employed to promote cohesion among citizens (Wright 2004), the use of a foreign language becomes intricately interconnected with the political and ideological issues.

From this it follows that in order to understand the possible scope of foreign language use in public life of a state we have to study the legislation concerning national language/s.

According to the Constitution of Russia, “the Russian language shall be the state language on the entire territory of the Russian Federation” (1993, Article 68). The Federal Law *On State*

Language of the Russian Federation (2005) specifies the areas of obligatory use of the state language of the Russian Federation, among them:

- activities of official bodies and organizations of any property forms, including record keeping activities;
- in the names of official bodies and organizations of any property forms;
- in preparing and conducting elections or referenda;
- in court;
- in official publication of international treaties of the Russian Federation or laws or other acts of legislation;
- in interaction between official bodies, organizations of any property forms and citizens of the Russian Federation, foreign citizens, stateless persons, public associations;
- in the names of geographical objects and in road signs;
- in execution of identification documents of citizens of the Russian Federation and other official documents.

These are areas which are normally mentioned in laws which regulate the use of a state language. As for the law *On State Language of the Russian Federation*, it also considerably restricts the use of other languages than Russian in such areas as the media and advertisement, with the exception of media agencies and publishing houses of periodicals specially established to perform activities in other languages.

The law specifies that in case of the use of another language together with the state language of the Russian Federation the information in Russian and in another language should be identical in content, sound, and method of information transfer. Thus, for example, interviews in a foreign language are accompanied by simultaneous translation into Russian. However, foreign films are dubbed into the Russian language and the foreign language is as a rule deleted completely.

It means that in a country like Russia where the use of foreign languages is not widespread, and the media, e.g. TV, instead of providing exposure to foreign languages, severely limits the use of foreign languages, the language policy implicitly deprecates the value of foreign language knowledge. As regards the law *On State Language of the Russian Federation*, I

would characterize it as overprotective towards the Russian language and restrictive to the use of foreign languages.

According to the measures undertaken by the state concerning language issues the language planning can be classified as status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning (Phillipson 2003, Wright 2004).

After reviewing the law *On State Language of the Russian Federation* and other possibilities for functioning of foreign languages in the Russian context, we can conclude that foreign language planning in Russia has for the most part to do with acquisition planning, which is “the way the learning of languages is organized in education” (Phillipson 2003:15).

5.3. Foreign languages in the Russian educational system

5.3.1. Context

As it has been mentioned above, in consequence of the transition to a different economic system many Russian people have experienced significant decline in standards of living. This made it necessary for the State to give special attention to ways of improving the quality of life of Russian citizens. The growth of the economy during 2001-2005 offered opportunities to increase the well-being of Russia's people without any negative consequences for the economy as e.g. inflation (Putin 2005). Priority national projects were proposed in areas such as health care, education and housing. Putin provided the following explanation of the choice of the areas:

“Firstly, these areas determine people's quality of life, and a society's well-being. Secondly, the solutions to these problems ultimately have a direct influence on a country's demographics and, most importantly, create the necessary preliminary conditions for the development of what we refer to as human capital.” (op. cit.)

After education has been defined as priority area, various programmes aimed at improvement of the national educational system have been developed. These are some examples of the programmes within the priority national project “Education”:

- “Innovative schools” – for the realization of this programme the State allocated the total amount of 9 billion rubles (approx. 340 mln. dollars) for purchase of material equipment, acquisition of methodological support and professional development of teachers (The Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF) 2007a);
- “Provision of all Russian schools with access to the Internet” – the realization of this large-scale programme made it possible not only to get access to the Internet for all institutions of general education of the country but also the opportunity to use the modern informative educational resources (MESRF 2007b).

In addition to directions determined by the priority national project “Education”, an extensive work on the development of new educational standards and curricula is being conducted in order to improve the quality of education. Federal state educational standards (FGOS) present a set of requirements to be met while implementing educational curricula at all levels in nationally accredited educational establishments (MESRF 2009). In 2007 a new structure of the state educational standards has been established (MESRF 2007c). From then on the state educational standards included the following requirements (MESRF 2009):

- requirements when it comes to the structure of the basic educational programmes, and also requirements when it comes to the proportion of obligatory part of the basic educational programme to the part formed by the participants of the educational process;
- requirements when it comes to the conditions of implementation of the basic educational programmes, including personnel, financial, material and technical, and other conditions;
- requirements when it comes to the results of mastering the basic educational programmes (my translation).

New curricula for foreign languages are being developed within the framework of the state educational standards. However, before describing the content of curriculum for a foreign language, namely the English language, it is important to give a general outline of foreign language learning in the Russian educational system.

5.3.2. The choice of foreign languages

As I have already mentioned before, while a Foreign language is a compulsory subject, it is not necessarily English that is learnt. Pupils can choose among foreign languages that are taught at school. Apart from English, the most commonly taught foreign languages are German, French and Spanish. However, it should be remarked that at the present time it is the English language that is most often chosen.

Furthermore, taking into account the global tendencies and following the recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) (1998), the Russian educational system has set a goal to support multilingual education. Within this framework measures have been taken aimed at providing a wide range of foreign languages to be learnt at school. It means that pupils can learn languages that were not taught at school before, the so-called “rare languages”, such as Polish, Italian, Finnish, Turkish, Arabic, Korean, Chinese and Japanese (MESRF 2007d).

Moreover, according to the Basic Educational Plan pupils have got the opportunity to learn a second foreign language at the stage of basic general education, and in case of particular local needs at the stage of primary general education (MESRF 2004).

5.3.3. Foreign (English) language curriculum at school

The fact that the Russian Federation is a member of the Council of Europe, which calls for common action in educational matters, induced the necessity to adjust the national educational standards with the European standards. The basis for working out educational programmes for foreign languages has become *the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (PACE 2001).

CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) is a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. The CEFR has adopted an action-oriented approach in which users and learners of a language are regarded as ‘social agents’ (Council of Europe 2001:9). According to this approach:

“Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences.” (op. cit.)

The CEFR provides the following definitions of competences (op. cit.):

- *Competences* are the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions.
- *General competences* are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities.
- *Communicative language competences* are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means.

The competence approach was accepted as a basis for modernization of the Russian education system as a whole (MESRF 2001) and development of new educational standards and programmes for foreign language teaching and learning, in particular. Consequently, the main objective of the subject “Foreign Language” has become the development of communicative competences, i.e. the ability to perform interpersonal and intercultural communication with foreign language users.

According to *the Approximate Programmes for Foreign Languages (The English Language)* (MESRF 2007e) the learning of a foreign language at school should be aimed at development of the following competences:

- *speech competences* – communicative skills in four main types of speech activity (talking, listening comprehension, reading and writing);

- *linguistic competences* – linguistic knowledge and skills (phonological, orthographical, lexical and grammatical); knowledge about linguistic phenomena of the foreign language; skills to express thoughts in different ways;
- *socio-cultural competences* – knowledge about culture, traditions and realities of the country/countries of the foreign language; ability to present native country, its culture in the context of intercultural communication;
- *compensatory competences* – ability to find a way out in the conditions of deficit of linguistic means during perception and production activities;
- *ability to learn* – knowledge on methods and strategies of self-directed learning, including the use of modern information technologies (my translation).

In addition, it has been emphasized that the socio-cultural competence should be in the focus of the educational process (op. cit.).

The basic curriculum allots the following number of hours for the foreign (English) language learning at the successive stages of general education (MESRF 2004):

	Total number of hours	Number of hours per week
Primary general education (2-4 year)	204	2
Basic general education (5-9 year)	525	3
Secondary (complete) general education (10-11 year)	210	3

It is also stated that 10% of the total number of hours can be used for application of a teacher-developed creative methods, different forms of organization of the educational process, implementation of modern pedagogical technologies (MESRF 2007e).

It is noteworthy that describing the outcomes of the educational process *the Approximate Programmes for Foreign Languages* (op. cit.) specify not only the level of knowledge and skills that must be attained, but more importantly, the ability to use the acquired knowledge and skills in practice and everyday life for:

- social adaptation; achievement of mutual understanding in the process of oral and written communication with the foreign language users; establishment of interpersonal and intercultural contacts within possible limits;
- development of a holistic view of the multilingual and multicultural world; understanding of the role of the native and foreign language in this world;
- familiarization with the values of the world culture with the help of foreign sources of information, including multimedia sources, and also through participation in exchange programmes, tourist trips, youth forums;
- transmission of the native country culture to representatives of other countries; development of perception of a self as a citizen of the native country and a citizen of the world (my translation).

Thereby, *the Approximate Programmes for Foreign Languages* highlight the importance of application of the acquired knowledge and skills in communication and information acquisition.

A number of factors that hinder the implementation of the policy can be named here. The Russian educational system is definitely not void of shortcomings in the foreign language planning. Suffice it to say, that due to low salaries the teacher's profession has lost its attractiveness, and there is a shortage of foreign language teachers at schools (Rosstat 2003, Table 4.5). There might be flaws in teaching methods or learning materials. Naturally, such things can create serious obstacles in the language learning process. Insufficient knowledge and skills, in its turn, might cause difficulties in communication in a foreign language and understanding information from various sources.

However, as I have argued before, educational policy and its actual implementation are far from the only factors impacting foreign language acquisition. In order to understand what other factors influence the process of foreign language acquisition, it is necessary to study the learners' perspective, namely their perception of the context and their activity. These topics will be in the focus of the next chapter.

6. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' INTERVIEWS

6.1. Context

Before I begin analysing the influence of the context on human activity, I would like to delineate how the context is perceived by the people. Since the focus of my research is foreign language acquisition, namely acquisition of the English language, I tried to understand what the English language means to particular people in their specific context and hence asked the students the following questions:

- What foreign language would they choose to learn, in case they didn't know any foreign languages?
- How can English language knowledge be used?
- Where can English language knowledge be used?

First and foremost, it is important to devote some attention to how the foreign language was actually chosen. I will then discuss what kind of context and in what way has been influencing the learners during the learning process. I will also present a brief account of personality traits the learners display in the process of interaction with the context.

It should be noted that the choice of the foreign language is basically made by the parents of students. The reason for this is that learning of a foreign language starts from the second year of schooling when the students are 7-8 years old, and one can hardly expect that children of this age can develop a nuanced understanding in regard to what language they want to learn or how they are going to use it in the future. One of the students even remarked that she didn't know that other foreign languages (German, French) were taught at school until later.

Moreover, the influence of parents can exhibit itself in later periods as well. Thus, one of the students, being asked about his deep involvement in English language learning, gave the following explanation:

Ну да. Но это не сразу так было. Это только со временем потом так получилось. ...Ну просто у меня все так как-то глупо вышло на самом деле. У меня просто... Ну он как предмет у меня не шел. У меня были какие-то плохие оценки что-то. И классе в пятом-шестом, не помню, у меня родители: «Типа, вот учи английский. Пригодится». Ну, пригодится и пригодится. Я начал ходить дополнительно заниматься. И до сих пор как бы.

Well, yes. But it was not like this in the beginning. It changed only in the course of time. ... It really happened with me quite in a silly way. I just.... I didn't progress much in it [English] at school. I got rather poor marks. And when I was in the fifth or sixth form, I do not remember exactly, my parents said: "You should learn English. You will need it". Well, if they say so.... I started to take extra classes. And I am still doing it. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

But it is obvious that the influence of parents on children is declining over the years and they cease to actively coordinate their children's learning activity, including foreign language learning activity. One of the students commented regarding parents' influence in the following way:

Ну от родителей... сейчас не очень много. То есть если раньше я к репетитору ходил, то есть мне закладывали, то что нужно знать, то есть понадобится. То сейчас больше от меня зависит.

Well, from parents ... not so much now. Thus, before I attended classes with a tutor; and they tried to form an understanding in me that it is necessary know it, that I will need it. But now it is mostly up to me. (Vladimir, school D, 22.10.2010)

Furthermore, parents understand their role in a different way and, as a result, their influence can vary in its character. Some parents "adopt a policy of laissez-faire" regarding the learning activity of children. The argument they bring is that at this age the student is mature enough to think for oneself and decide which subjects to prioritize and how much energy to devote to foreign language learning. However, if the student starts to get bad marks, many parents do reconsider their standpoint and try to convince the student to rectify the situation.

Other parents openly express their approval of the student's interest to learn a foreign language because foreign language will be connected with the future profession or might be useful at a later period in life. It is, however, noteworthy that parents' influence is far from the only and rarely main factor in what attitude a student will form towards foreign language learning.

The reason for this, in my opinion, is that the students do not take for granted what they are told by either parents or teachers. They form their own viewpoint which in some cases can be opposite to that of parents' or teachers'. Thus, being asked if the teacher ever said anything on the importance of learning the English language, some of the students offered the following answers:

Да, конечно. Но это... мы и сами так понимаем это очень хорошо.

Yes, of course. But this ... we ourselves understand it very well. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Нет. Наверное, нет. Ну, не потому что там он плохой учитель. А просто потому что... если мы... ну потому что мы сознательные люди. Если мы это учим, то мы это учим. Это... потому что мы сами понимаем важность языка. Мы можем сказать там: «Нет! Да зачем мне этот язык!» И вполне возможно, что учитель скажет зачем он нужен. Но если мы все понимаем, что это на самом деле надо, и важно, и просто...

No. I guess, not. And not because he is a bad teacher. But just because ... if we ... because we understand everything ourselves. If we learn it, then we learn it. This ... we understand the importance of the language. Of course we can say: "Why?! I don't need this language!" And most probably the teacher will explain why we need it. But because we understand everything, that we really need it, and that it is important, and just... (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Даже если она это скажет, те, кому это не надо и не видят они в этом смысла, все равно они учить его не будут.

Even if she says it, those, who do not need it (foreign language) and think it's pointless (learning a foreign language), they will not learn it all the same. (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

Moreover, the students demonstrate ability for analytical and critical thinking. For example, they question the necessity to learn a foreign language in a particular context or they criticize forcible measures to make people learn a foreign language when there is no real need for it. By way of illustration, I refer to the students' comments on the proposition to introduce obligatory exam in a foreign language for high school graduates:

Но это не поможет. Это не улучшит качество... Ну, хоть как-то выучим и забудем после экзамена. А осадок останется, что неприятно это было делать, потому что это насильно.

But it will not help. It will not improve the quality... Well, we will learn something and forget it after the exam. However, an unpleasant feeling will stay, because we had to do it against our will. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

Мне кажется, не нужно. Если, допустим, человеку не нужно этот язык, зачем ему учить его? Как насильно человека заставляют повышать свои знания, чтобы сдать экзамен, а ему в жизни не пригодится. Против воли человека все равно, мне кажется, не нужно идти. Человека нужно заинтересовать, чтобы изучать английский, а не заставить.

I think it shouldn't be done. Suppose a person doesn't need to know this language, why should he learn it? The person is forced to improve his knowledge to pass the exam, and then it won't prove to be useful in his life. In my opinion, it shouldn't be done against a person's will. It is better to interest a person in learning English, rather than make him do it. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

Нужно улучшать отношение, во-первых, к языку другому. Показать людям, то что он нужен. Вот. Чтобы они поверили, то что... реально осознали. Вот. И, может быть, тогда какие-нибудь меры и принимать. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

First of all, it is necessary to improve the attitude to another language. To show people that they will need it. So that they would believe ... realize it. And only after that to take any steps. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

So we can see that the first student doubts that the exam is an appropriate tool to raise the level of proficiency in a foreign language; the second student believes that to motivate a person is much better than to compel him/her to do something, and, in addition, hints at the issue of congruence between what is taught at school and what is needed in life; and the third student points to the necessity to create incentives to learn a foreign language and only then introduce measures aimed at controlling the level of proficiency in this language.

From what has been said above, it can be concluded that immediate social relations are diminishing in their impact on the students' activity as the students are getting older. The students expand their perception of the surrounding world while participating in different kinds of activities (Leont'ev 1978). As a result, they take decisions in accordance with the information they get through various channels and on the basis of personal experience. This pertains to foreign language acquisition as one of the forms of human activity. The students build their perception of the English language taking into account the information from the broader context.

Now I am going to examine different layers of the context as they are perceived by the students. The main purpose for me is to find out how the students' evaluation of different layers of the context in regard to possible use of the English language influences their perception of the English language.

It is quite remarkable that all the students without exception think that it is necessary to learn foreign languages. As some of the students remarked:

Со знанием только одного языка далеко не уйдешь в наше время.

You won't get very far with only one language nowadays. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Помимо русского языка человек должен знать какой-то еще. Как бы это должно быть в порядке вещей.

Besides Russian, a person must know some other language. It should be as a matter of course. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

It might indicate that learning a foreign language means more to them than just an obligatory activity which is part of educational programme.

The arguments which they provide in favour of foreign language learning can be divided into two groups. The first group of arguments has to do with personal development (e.g. cognitive development, linguistic development, cultural development, building self-esteem), and doesn't imply learning any specific language. Apparently learning any foreign language has more or less the same positive developmental effect on a person. However, other arguments suggest that it is the English language that should be learnt. The students mention such domains as:

- pop music
- computer technology
- science
- education (international programmes)
- communication (foreign travel)

where the English language prevails, since for the present it is holding the top position in the world and is regarded as a lingua franca in many places and in many situations. It is no wonder then that when asked directly on what language should be learnt as the first foreign language, all the students named English.

There is one point I would like to stress in relation to the arguments for foreign language learning. I think that commencing any kind of activity, especially the one which involves a lot of time and effort, we always consider what we gain from it. The same is true when it comes to foreign language learning. As Fishman has put it: “Languages are rarely acquired for their own sake” (1977:115), and quite naturally the students have some ideas of what benefits from foreign language learning there can be, and which language is more advantageous to learn.

I would like to present an example that can support this argument. Interviewing the students I was trying to find out what could be the reasons to start leaning a foreign language. So I suggested that the students imagine that they are coming to a foreign country where people speak a language the students do not know and reflect if they would start learning this language. Some of them said that they would start learning the language from the first day because it is a good way to learn about the new culture. Yet, the majority of the students would consider the necessity to learn the language more thoroughly. As one student remarked:

Да я не знаю. Ну, как там бы было, посмотреть. Если бы надо было, то да. Если б можно было с одним, то с одним.

I do not know. Well, I would see. If I needed to, then yes. If I could do with one [foreign language], then I wouldn't [learn more than one foreign language]. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

The important factors that could influence their decision are the length of stay and the purpose of stay, and both are related to the degree of necessity to use the foreign language. The longer the stay the more pressing the need to know the local language:

Если, допустим, на два-три дня, то это не обязательно. А на какой-то продолжительный, допустим, срок, то это уже, я думаю, надо использовать. Научиться пользоваться местным языком.

Suppose, it's two-three days, then it is not necessary. But, if it is a long period, then I think it's necessary to use, to learn the local language. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

Чем дольше, тем больше и упорно его надо учить. Потому что, если там приехал на неделю, я вполне, наверное, могу без него обойтись. Если хотя бы месяц, то это уже очень важно, я думаю.

The longer [the stay], the more and harder one should learn it. Because, if I come for a week, I can probably do without it fairly well. But if it is a month, then it is very important, I think. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Besides, the students explain why they might need this language:

...многие люди, с которыми тебе нужно общаться, может быть, даже не нужно, а хочется общаться, разговаривают на другом языке и, если, вы не понимаете, то это проблема.

... many people, with whom you need to communicate, not necessarily need, but want to communicate, they speak another language, and if you do not understand, it is a problem. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Потребуется все равно, если... для дальнейшего проживания там, для образования.

It will be needed all the same if ... for permanent residence, for education. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

Если, допустим, оставаться жить, то понятно бы – изучал.

Supposing, I am going to live there, well, then I would learn for sure. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

These comments demonstrate that a foreign language would unlikely be learnt unless it serves a useful function for a person (Cooper 1989) satisfying various needs, e.g. social needs.

Returning to the preference for the English language among the students, I would like to suggest two explanations for this. The first one was touched upon above, when I was talking of the students' growing awareness of tendencies in the world, among them wide use of English. Hence, talking of the English language they use such attributes as "international", "global", "widely-spread in the world", "mostly used".

The other explanation has to do with their belonging to a certain culture. I think that the choice of a foreign language is to a great extent determined by language patterns and tendencies in the specific culture. Parents and children naturally share language beliefs, attitudes and ideology. And while in some parts of the world it is not necessarily English that is associated with social and economic capital for the resident population, in Russia it is English that takes a leading position among foreign languages. Thus, giving preference to English, the students support the choice of the foreign language which their parents made for them before.

Here we face an important issue that arises in connection with language attitudes, namely, the relation between attitudes and activity. The point is that, in the case of Russia, along with the unquestioned discourse of the importance of learning the English language there is reality which does not provide evidence for general practice of acquiring and sustaining high proficiency in English.

I suppose that the core of the problem lies in the fact that the specific context imposes constraints on the use of a foreign language and, as a consequence, reduces the possibility of obtaining some benefit from the possession of foreign language knowledge and skills. In other words there is a mismatch between possible capital and actual capital of English language knowledge.

Besides, to understand the patterns of foreign language learning and use in a specific context we should not only take into consideration various types of capital related to the use of foreign language but also the extent of use of a foreign language in this context.

Let us first see what types of capital students associate with the English language knowledge and skills. When I asked the students about the way in which English could be used, the most typical answer was – for communication with foreigners either when they come to Russia or when the students go abroad. I believe it is not surprising that social capital takes the first place because communicative function is one of the main functions of the language.

Furthermore, they think that English language knowledge enhances career opportunities, and some of them do not exclude the possibility of working or living abroad. From this it can be

concluded that English language knowledge is related to economic capital and in certain conditions can be converted into financial assets.

Moreover, knowledge of the English language constitutes cultural capital and can be employed in a variety of activities. First and foremost, the students can use the English language to obtain information, particularly information available only in English, e.g. most of computer software and the latest technological gadgets. Such information is nowadays easily accessible through the Internet. Besides, they say that they can use English to listen to the songs, read books and watch films. What is more, English language knowledge can be necessary to take examinations to enter some higher education institution or to participate in international educational programmes.

Some of the students also commented on the large quantity of words borrowed from English into Russian, thus, English language knowledge constitutes linguistic capital which can help to understand these words, and at the same time be more sensitive to the trends in the native language.

And, last but not least, it should be noted that English language knowledge has definitely some symbolic capital attributed to it. All the students accord this kind of knowledge merit and consider proficiency in English as an indicator of educational and even cognitive level.

The activities which I have just specified are related to different types of capital and serve different purposes. I will later on discuss what type of capital has more impact on the students' activities and will try to single out some personal constraints that prevent activities bound with the use of English to be performed. And now I would like to examine the relation between capital and context further in order to understand to what extent the students can benefit from the possession of English language knowledge in their specific context, in other words, what the actual capital of English language knowledge for the students is.

Since the English language is widely used in the world, I presume that it is a high degree of possibility to find a person who can speak some English while you travel abroad and need to communicate in a foreign language. Few students, however, have been abroad. And while the general attitude to travelling is positive and they are willing to visit new places and

experience different cultures, it doesn't seem to be common practice yet. One of the students commented on his sister's trip to Poland in the following way:

Я ей просто завидовал. То что вот ей посчастливилось побывать.

I just envied her. That she had the luck to have been there. (Vladimir, school D, 22.10.2010)

Another girl said that she is dreaming of travelling abroad. The emotional tinge of the verbs used by the students is indicative of little probability that they will travel abroad – at least in the nearest future. In fact, they often talked about this kind of travelling in the future tense, as something which might happen but not entirely clear how soon:

...я хочу путешествовать. Я там вообще собиралась быть менеджером по туризму, но сейчас передумала. Но все равно планирую потом посмотреть мир-то.

... I want to travel. I was planning to become a travel agent, but I have changed my mind for the present. But I am planning to see the world all the same. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

Another possibility to speak English is to communicate with foreigners who come to Russia. The students stated that there is considerable difference in the amount of foreigners between Moscow and the city where they live in. They explained that due to the specific status of Moscow the city is attractive among foreigners both for business and tourism purposes. Consequently, there is a good chance to hear foreign speech, including English, in Moscow. Whereas on the possibility to hear English in their city, the students commented in the following way:

На улице нет.

In the street – no. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

Нет, навряд ли.

No. Hardly. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

Можно. Наверное, можно. Очень, конечно, сложно, но можно.

It is possible. I think it is possible. It is difficult of course, but possible. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Кавказский язык вы любой на улице у нас найдете. А вот насчет английского, французского, да, вряд ли, наверное. Или это будет большая редкость.

It is no problem to hear any Caucasian language in the street. As for English, French – hardly, I suppose. Or it happens extremely rarely. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

However, some students mentioned that the city is visited by foreign tourists. As one of the students said:

Их же очень много обычно бывает в центре. Они приезжают на больших автобусах. Вот они идут, говорят, и пытаешься вслушаться, что-то понять.

There are a lot of them coming to the centre [of the city]. They come in big buses. And they walk and talk, and you try to hear and understand something. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Yet, two points should be noted in relation to this remark. Firstly, tourists who come in big busses usually have a sight-seeing tour for some hours and after that leave the city. Secondly, even if the students can hear people speak English, it doesn't necessarily mean that they come in contact with them. Summing up these facts, we can conclude that the town context provides limited possibilities for meeting foreigners and talking to them. As a result, some students have never experienced face-to-face communication with foreigners in English.

Others did happen to have some private contacts with foreigners:

Встречал. Ну, знакомые... через знакомых знакомился с иностранцами, и там приходилось элементарно хотя бы применять.

I have met. Well, friends ... I got acquainted with foreigners through friends, and that's where I used [English language], at least at the elementary level. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

...к нам приезжали по обмену французы... и мне приходилось разговаривать то по-французски с ними чуть-чуть, то по-английски в основном разговаривали.

... some French came to us on an exchange visit ... and I had to speak French a little bit, but we mostly spoke English. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Another student narrated about youth camps (e.g. educational forum), where she met young people from other countries. So we can see that there are domains where communication in English is possible, but this communication is definitely limited in time.

A point should be made about the levels of the context though. The features of the environment which are conditioned by the city level are common and experienced in more or less the same way by all the students. In contrast the educational environment is specific depending on particular properties of the school. Thus, students from one school can meet with foreigners at school and students from another school cannot. In school A, for example, the teacher takes a personal initiative and, when opportunity occurs, invites foreigners to come to her lessons:

Ну вот она, например, часто приводит нам иностранцев, если у нее есть такая возможность. Какие-то гости приезжают, она приводит сюда.

Well, she [teacher], for example, often brings foreigners to us, when there is an opportunity. When some guests come, she invites them here. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

School C specializes in English language learning and every year a group of English people come to school to test the students' knowledge and skills in English. According to one of the students from this school:

То что тут с англичанами поговорили, мне кажется, все из нашей школы.

I suppose, everyone from our school has spoken with English people. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

I will later on discuss the relation between the school context and English language learning and use activities in order to understand the effect of variation in the school context on these activities.

Concerning communication possibilities, there is one more domain I cannot leave out. Nowadays the Internet provides unrestricted possibilities to communicate with people from different parts of the world in a variety of languages. Moreover, due to the technological progress in addition to e-mail and instant messaging computer programmes people can use programmes that allow them to make free voice and video calls. All the students, I have talked with, have a computer at home and all of them, except one student, have a fast-speed Internet connection that would allow using these programmes. Nevertheless, the majority of them do not communicate with foreigners in the Internet. Only few have tried to communicate

through instant messaging computer programmes or do it occasionally and only one student communicates with the use of video camera.

Besides, one student told me that he communicated in English while playing computer games on the Internet:

Ну как бы онлайн – по всему миру. Допустим, 30 миллионов человек в ней играет. По всему миру как бы. И между ними можно общаться, если их в игре найдешь конкретно.

Well, it is online [game] – all over the world. Suppose 30 million people play it. All over the world. And you can communicate with them, in case you find them in the game. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

I assume that limited use of the Internet for communication purposes in English arises from personal factors which I will try to address when discussing particularities of the English language use activity.

Let's now see when the English language can become economic capital. One of the students while sharing her plans for higher education said that she would like to specialize in English. In this case the English language is going to be a part of her qualification and, consequently, constitute economic capital for her. This also pertains to the jobs where English is a part of qualification, e.g. jobs within travel business.

For other students, English will become economic capital if they apply for a job where English language knowledge is an employment requirement. As one student said:

Ну если ты работаешь в сфере политики или международных отношений каких-то – это очень важно. А если ты разнорабочий, вот зачем он? Не надо английский знать.

If you work in the sphere of politics or international relations – it is very important. But if you are an unskilled worker, why then? It is not necessary to know English. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

The general opinion among the students is that English might be useful or necessary in their future working life. But many of them do not feel it necessary to focus on English language learning at present giving preference to other school subjects that are related to their future

profession and hence constitute economic capital. The following quotes are the students' responses to my question whether for the time being they would take a course in English that could guarantee improvement in knowledge and skills:

Пошла бы. Если бы это не мешало всему остальному.

I would join it. If it didn't interfere with everything else. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Ну, у меня не идет английский как тот, который бы я хотел сдавать... Но, если после сдачи экзаменов и подготовки, то вполне можно было.

Well, English is not among the subjects I would choose to take the final exam in....¹
But, after the exams and all reading up for the exams, I could well join it. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

Besides, as far as I can judge from the students' comments they would make English language learning a priority in order to improve their knowledge and skills only in case they have definite prospects for a job bound with English language use. This might mean that actually there are not so many jobs in the Russian context for the students to think that they would inevitably need English language knowledge in the nearest future.

There might be greater need for the English language if a person decides to work abroad. But several issues require our attention in relation to this prospect. To begin with, it should be noted that the students think that labour market abroad offers better opportunities for work:

В России не так много перспектив, как за границей.

There are not so many [good career] prospects, as abroad. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Там и оплата больше, и более престижно.

Salary level is higher there, and it is more prestigious [to work abroad]. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

But we should not forget that, as mentioned above, few of the students have been abroad. Due

¹ When leaving school all the students must take graduation examination (Unified State Exam). Russian and Mathematics are compulsory subjects; other subjects are at the students' option. Official Data Portal of the Unified State Exam: <http://www.ege.edu.ru/>

to low mobility they have limited knowledge about life abroad, and might create an image of it that somewhat differs from reality. As some students remarked:

...вот все стремятся у нас в Москву, в Петербург, а я не хочу туда. ...Я считаю, лучше в Европу, там и качество жизни... Ну, хоть я и не была там, но думаю, что там лучше.

Well, everyone wants to go to Moscow, Saint Petersburg, but I don't want to go there. ... I think it's better to go to Europe, with regard to the quality of life there.... Even though I haven't been there, but I think that it's better there. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

Там намного все проще. Тут у нас в России кризис даже тот же самый. Там его нет.

It is much easier there. It is a [economic] crisis here in Russia. They do not have it there. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Besides, insufficient information about job opportunities together with specific job requirements in other countries and rather complicated procedure for obtaining work permit do not let working in foreign countries become widespread practice:

...для русских людей еще ново искать работу где-то еще и за границей. То есть легче найти в России...

... it is still new for Russian people to look for a job abroad. It is much easier to find [a job] in Russia.... (Vladimir, school D, 22.10.2010)

As a result, the prospect to work abroad remains something which is wished or desired rather than something which can be planned and fulfilled. Thus, one of the students, who was very positive to the idea of working abroad, and, in addition, was motivated by the parents to do that, expressed doubt that it could actually happen:

Да не знаю. Я вряд ли отсюда уеду. Попытаться попытаюсь. Нет – нет.

I don't know actually. It's unlikely that I will leave [Russia]. I will give it a try. If I do not succeed, then nothing can be done about it. (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

Moreover, both limited contacts with foreigners and little experience of foreign travel result in viewing foreigners as “the Other”. This attaches psychological dimension to evaluation of the

prospect of working abroad. Thus, some students stated that it might be difficult for them to live abroad because people there are different:

...мне кажется, я бы не смогла. Тяжело. Во-первых, и другое вот общение, и менталитет, все это.

... I think I would not be able to do it. It's difficult. First of all, communication is different, and mentality, all these... (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

...а жить, не знаю. Потому что как бы, ну вот не знаю. Здесь уже нужно думать, и думать так очень серьезно. Потому что все равно это другой менталитет. Вообще другие люди.

... to live, I do not know. Because, well, I do not know. It must be thought over, and thought over very thoroughly. Because it is different mentality. Completely different people. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

And, finally, one more point should be mentioned about the decision to work abroad. While short-term work experience abroad is considered beneficial, and here is the quote from a student to this effect:

Мне кажется... ну можно сказать так – токарь, мне кажется, прошедший стажировку за границей, и видевший, что там, какие там технологии, это уже лучше, чем токарь, который сидит просто в России, без языка, без всего. Потому что, ну в любом случае, это повышение уровня.

I think ... well, I can put it the following way – lathe operator, I suppose, having taken internship abroad and having seen how it is there, what technologies are used there, is better than the one who stays just in Russia, without the [foreign] language, without everything. Because at all events it is improvement of the level. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Still, leaving for another country poses a dilemma. Even though nowadays it is much easier for Russian people to go abroad than before, for many it is not an easy decision to leave the country. One student mentioned financial aspect that might cause difficulties in visiting homeland while living abroad:

...я бы долго думала, наверное, прежде чем оставить Россию и уехать жить за границу. Хотя если бы был контакт постоянный, то есть, если б я знала, что я... вот если бы были деньги, я бы знала, что я могу прилетать, все, тогда бы, наверное, я бы там легче согласилась.

... I would think hard, I suppose, before I left Russia to live abroad. Though, if I could keep contact, if I knew that I ... if I had money, and I knew that I could come regularly, well, then it would be easier to take this decision. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Another student alluded to moral decision that should be made while contemplating the prospect of living abroad, because in addition to the feeling of attachment to the homeland expressed by some students she felt it important that people should contribute to the well-being of their own country:

...просто даже уехать из России, наверное, очень тяжело, потому что как-то хочется, чтобы и своя страна развивалась.

... I suppose, it would be very hard [decision] to leave Russia because I wish our country to develop as well. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Apparently, the factors that make English language knowledge an indispensable attribute of a working person are still not in place in the Russian context, and, in consequence, many students do not consider it necessary to prioritize English language learning together with the subjects directly linked to their future job.

Now I would like to turn to the discussion of the English language knowledge as cultural capital. It is a widely held opinion that learning a foreign language has a positive effect on cognitive development and cultural enrichment. As one of the students put it:

Любой язык, даже, ну и английский тоже... повышает как-то культуру людей, наверное, все-таки. ...ну, расширяет как сознание, получается.

Any language, including English... raises cultural level of people, I think ... broadens one's mind, as a matter of fact. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

However, from the point of view of cognitive development, foreign language learning in no way takes precedence over other subjects, such as Russian, Literature, Mathematics, History, etc. Besides, personal inclination is a powerful factor that in large part determines what subject a student is particularly involved in. One of the students told me that every student in her class had profound knowledge in this or that subject and explained it in the following way:

У каждого, естественно, это как-то... ну больше восприятие к чему-то одному, чем к другому. ...То есть, ну, у нас люди совершенно все разные. У всех как бы разные потребности, может быть, к чему-то, чтобы развиваться.

It is natural that one has, how shall I put ... well, better apprehension of one thing than the other. ... That is, all students [in my class] are entirely different. Everyone has individual inclination, I suppose, to develop in a certain way. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Thus, even though English language learning exerts wholesome influence on cognitive development in a number of ways, still it is not always the case that it is this subject that is prioritized by a student.

Regarding the access to various resources in the English language, as books, films, songs, etc., which allow using English language knowledge as cultural capital, it doesn't seem to present any problem for the students. Moreover, the Internet opens up unlimited opportunities to access all kinds of information, video and music. All the students claimed that the English language occupies the leading position in the Internet. Yet, the students remarked that they turned to the websites in English mostly in case when they could not find particular information in Russian. As one of the students put it:

Ну бывают случаи, но это из-за того, то что не мог найти версию на русском языке. Приходилось. Вынужден был.

Well, it happens once in a while, but only because I couldn't find the Russian version. I had no choice. I had to. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

Here are some of the examples of this “forced” use of the English language in the Internet:

Много сайтов, которые на других языках. Там много интересной информации. Вот я, вот как пользователь Интернета, могу сказать, то что очень... ну достаточно страниц, которые на английском языке и можно понять только зная его.

There are many websites in other languages with a lot of interesting information. And I, as an Internet-user, can say that many... quite a number of websites are in English, and you can understand [what is written there] only if you know it. (Vladimir, school D, 22.10.2010)

Допустим, нужно найти какую-то информацию, а на русских сайтах этих файлов нет. А на английский сайт зайти, там более широкая база и проще что-нибудь найти нужное.

For example, you need some information, but you can't find these files on the Russian websites. As for the English websites, their databases are bigger, and it is easier to find what you need. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

Допустим, вот я люблю фотографировать. Есть особые сайты, где рассказывается, там как что делать, но они только на английском. Вот приходится там тоже читать.

For instance, I like to take photos. And there are special websites which explain how you should do it. But they are only in English. So I have to read there. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

...я уже почти год люблю футбол. У меня сейчас любимый футболист как бы перешел в английский клуб. И там вот сейчас английская Премьер-Лига идет. ...Так вот, значит, у нас там каждую субботу в 6 вечера, где-то шесть игр сразу. А по каналу «Спорт» только одну показывают, и, как правило, это какой-нибудь «Манчестер Юнайтед», «Челси», «Арсенал». А вот мой-то клуб ну как бы не показывают. И я сейчас в Интернете смотрю матч, он-лайн трансляцию именно вот прямо оттуда, и там комментатор на английском говорит.

... I have been into football for almost a whole year. My favorite football player has moved to an English club. Presently, the English Premier League is under way. ...Well, about six games take place simultaneously at 6 o'clock every Saturday. The channel "Sport" shows only one [game], and usually it is Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal. But they do not show my club. So I watch the match in the Internet, online broadcasting directly from the match, with the English commentator. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

It is, also, noteworthy that some students reported an active use of Internet translation programmes, which means that they might translate the information and read it in Russian instead of using English language knowledge.

Furthermore, due to the abundance of resources in Russian there is no pressing necessity to visit websites in English. One of the students offered the following explanation for the use of the Internet resources in the English language:

Вот кто заинтересован в языке в иностранном, те будут искать что-то на английском языке. Им будет интересно. Вот. А если тебе этот не нужен язык, если тебе не нравится, зависит от тебя, там понимаешь ты его, не понимаешь, от учителя зависит, тогда ты не будешь заходить на эти страницы. Ну мне кажется, ну как-то все получается идет от человека, потому что все проблемы именно в человеке.

Those, who are interested in the foreign language, they will look for something in the English language. It will be interesting for them. But if a person doesn't need this language, if he doesn't like ... much depends on the person, if he understands it or not ... it depends on the teacher ... well, then he will not visit these websites. I guess, well, it appears that much depends on the person, because all the problems are in the person. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Thereby, we can draw a conclusion that while the resources in English are easily accessible, their employment is left much to the personal choice, and this choice is often made not in favour of English.

However, I believe that the value accorded to the English language knowledge as cultural capital can be profoundly influenced by the degree of exposure to the language provided by media, e.g. TV. According to the students, there is no English on free channels, except interviews with people speaking English, which are simultaneously translated into Russian:

...в новостях часто затрагивается про разные страны, то что там происходит. И сразу же добавляется русский перевод к этому.

... they tell about different countries, what is going on there. And the Russian translation is added instantly. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

It is possible to watch English channels if a person pays extra to get connection to cable television or to install a satellite dish. As one student remarked on this point:

Есть каналы, которые на английском, но это тарелка, которая стоит денег, опять же, то есть это уже...

There are channels in English, but you get them through a satellite dish, and it costs money, so it is... well... (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Since not everyone can afford to pay for such channels, they have no access to them. One student, for instance, said that she could watch satellite TV when she stayed in a hotel:

Даже, помню, мы ездили в Питер. Там, видимо... гостиница очень хорошая была. ...там вот именно спутниковое телевидение было. Вот. Там совершенно разные, очень... порядка так 20-ти, наверное, каналов на других языках. И французский, и немецкий, и украинский, испанский даже был. Вот я его даже посмотрела. Очень понравилось.

I remember that we went to Saint Petersburg. Apparently the hotel was very good. ... there was satellite television there. Well. There were various ... around 20 channels, I suppose, in other languages: French, German, Ukrainian, even Spanish, which I also watched. I liked it very much. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Besides, if they had cable or satellite TV it is not definite that they would choose to watch channels in English.

Another crucial factor that could make English language knowledge a significant form of cultural capital is its use in getting higher education. Yet, higher education in Russia is basically in the Russian language. As for participation in international programmes which allow taking part of education abroad it is possible but not so common. While some students think that it would be too difficult for them to study abroad or that it is better to get higher education in Russia, others would be interested to try if they got this opportunity. But only one student said that she is looking into the possibilities to participate in exchange programmes.

To sum up what has been said above, it can be argued that, in general, there is not much evidence on the high value of the English language as cultural capital among the students I have talked to.

Finally, I would like to focus on the way the English language functions as symbolic capital. All the students shared the same positive attitude towards proficiency in the English language and said that high proficiency in English evoked such feelings in them as pride and respect. The following comments vividly exemplify this kind of attitude:

...мне кажется, что как-то уважаешь себя, наверное, когда знаешь, что другой язык, вот что ты выучил.

... I think you gain respect for yourself when you know that you have learned another language. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Даже гордость какая-то за человека, потому что не только остановился на развитии знаний своего языка, но еще знает и другие языки.

You feel pride in a person, because he does not only focus on deepening the knowledge of his own language, but also knows other languages. (Vladimir, school D, 22.10.2010)

It is quite remarkable that when talking about their attitude to someone's proficiency in English what the students actually meant by proficiency was knowledge of the English language; a certain amount of information which, as some students said, they would also like to acquire or certain level they would also like to attain. I will suggest that this particular emphasis on knowledge is caused by the influence which the educational context exerts on them. And since one of the aims of education is to transmit knowledge, it is not surprising that any kind of profound knowledge generally possesses high value in this context. As one of the students put it:

Знание, которого не имеешь ты, всегда достоинство. Всегда вызывает уважение.

Knowledge, that you do not have, is always a merit. It always inspires respect. (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

However, there are two issues worth our attention in regard to symbolic capital. The first has to do with the way symbolic capital of the English language operates in the school context. While it is the case that knowledge is valued by the students, it does not necessarily have an effect on the status of its possessor. When asked whether a classmate with deep knowledge in English inspires respect, one of the students said:

Х-м-м-м! Это зависит от самого человека. Если человек хороший, то и как бы и уважение. А если человек – дурачок, что, какое к нему уважение?

Humph! It depends on what kind of person he is. If he is a good person, then he is respected. If he is a fool, then, what respect can he deserve?! (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

In all probability, deep knowledge in a particular subject or in a number of subjects is not enough to earn respect among classmates. Besides, there is no evidence that possession of profound knowledge by one particular student inspires other students in actual practice to make efforts in order to improve their level of knowledge. This is an important point that is related to the forces that influence a foreign language learner's activity, the topic which I am going to discuss at great length in the next section.

The other issue to be emphasized is related to the nature of symbolic capital. The very fact that symbolic capital is based on prestige suggests that knowledge which has symbolic value is unequally distributed, and probably scarce. Conversely, when everyone acquires certain

knowledge on a common basis it ceases to be high-status, prestigious knowledge. Here are some of the students' remarks which show that high proficiency in a foreign language is still perceived by the students as something quite rare:

Это... гордость, то что хоть один человек знает английский.

You feel ... pride that at least one person knows English. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

...достоинство. Что человек знает другой язык. Что знает что-то новое в отличие от других.

... it is a merit ... that a person knows a foreign language, knows something new in contrast to the others. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

It might be suggested that even though the English language is learnt by all students, few attain high proficiency in it. Here I have approached another important characteristic of the context that should be discussed, the extent of use of the English language in the Russian context. This is the theme to which I am now going to turn my attention.

While the concept of capital is helpful in understanding where and how English language knowledge can be used with certain personal benefit, the extent of use of the English language is illuminating in understanding how high the value of English language knowledge for the people is in the Russian context. I would argue that the more extensive the use of the foreign language in the particular context is the more possibilities there are to use foreign language knowledge and realize profit from it. Moreover, if we consider the extent of use as a continuum, the part of the continuum with the widest extent makes the use of the foreign language a pressing necessity which unlike possibility to use the foreign language is not weighed for pros and cons but conformed to.

I think that in order to understand the extent of use of a foreign language in the context, we should talk not only about a variety of domains or the number of domains where the foreign language is used but also about social distribution of the foreign language, in other words the amount of people possessing knowledge of a foreign language. This parameter can be reckoned as an important indicator of the value of foreign language knowledge in the context. And at the same time it is a frame of reference for the students in their understanding of the value of foreign language knowledge.

I should make a reservation that I am not going to present any specific numbers. What I am going to do is to outline some characteristic features of the context from the students' point of view, and one can hardly expect the students to use statistical data in their description of the context. Rather they construct their perception from their personal experiences and information they get in everyday life from different levels of the context.

I would like to start with the immediate social relations; first parents, as that is the information the students chronologically get first, and then friends.

First, I was interested to know what foreign languages the students' parents learnt at school. It turned out that in most cases it was either English or German. Then I tried to find out how the students perceived their parents' proficiency in these languages. Most students said that their parents did not remember the foreign languages they learnt; some said that the parents remembered something; and very few said that the parents could speak the foreign language. As far as I can judge from the students' comments the parents do not use the foreign language knowledge. So we can assume that the students have better knowledge of the English language than those parents who learnt it, since the students are learning it at the moment. As one girl commented on her parents' English language knowledge:

Помнят. Ну, опять же сестре помогают. Но уже не те знания. Получается, что я больше по-английски знаю.

They remember. For instance, they help my sister. But the level of knowledge is not the same as it used to be. So, in fact, I know English better than they do. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

I think that parents' proficiency in a foreign language is an important characteristic of the context. In this connection it may be also instructive to consider what parents say about foreign language learning and use. And while some parents do not single out the English language subject, others try to motivate the students to learn the language supporting their argument by the examples from their experience:

...английский, я считаю, и родители мои считают, что первостепенный. Потому что даже вот сейчас они сами ездят на всякие различные конференции, например, по медицине. И вот она говорит: «Знаешь, у нас там выходит врач, и она спокойно переводит английскую речь. Это ж так здорово, что врач вот знает

все. Это ж очень здорово!» Поэтому они нацеливают, что английский надо учить.

... My parents and I think that English is of paramount importance. For example, they often go to different medical conferences. And she says: "You know, there was one doctor, who came out and without any difficulty translated from English into Russian. That is so wonderful that a doctor can do it. That's great!" That's why they motivate me to learn English. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Папа у меня работает в фирме... ну занимающейся перевозками там всяких замороженных... ягод всяких вот, грибов... Как раз они работают с... с Норвегией, по-моему. ...И он говорит, что ему не хватает английского языка в работе.

My father works in a company ... that carries out transportation of different frozen ... berries, mushrooms.... As far as I know they also work with Norway. ... And he says that he lacks English in his work. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

The examination of the family context shows that many parents cannot speak English and do not stress that the students should learn it. However, those who emphasize the importance of learning English do not learn or use it themselves, in other words do not set an example which could influence their children. This is one of the evidences of the gap between the discourse of the importance of English language knowledge and actual practice.

Regarding English language proficiency among friends, most of the students stated that few have high level of proficiency. However, there was some variation among schools, with somewhat bigger numbers in school A than in schools B and D. School C should be discussed separately. Due to the intensive curriculum with more hours of instruction and special learning materials more students manage to acquire good knowledge in English. When I asked one student from school C how many among his friends knew English well, he said that everyone. But when I asked him if his friends were from the same school, he said:

Ну из этой школы. А из других и нет. Из других... у меня парень из университета более-менее знает.А так, особо, никто не знает.

Yes, from this school. I do not have friends from other schools. From other ... I have a friend who studies at university, he knows fairly well. Apart from him, nobody knows. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

It is apparent that in most cases the immediate social relations do not provide the students with solid ground to make efforts to improve English language knowledge.

Furthermore, I wanted to find out what kind of influence the broader context exerts on the students, and asked them about their estimation of English language knowledge among Russian people. What interested me was not so much the numbers (roughly expressed in per cent), as the students' perception of the country context.

When I asked the students about English language knowledge among Russian people, they wanted me to specify what level of proficiency I meant. So I suggested that we differentiated between people with basic and advanced knowledge. In the first instance, these are people who have some knowledge of English, or as one student expressed it:

...те, которые считают, что они знают язык, но на самом деле – так себе.

... those who think that they know the language, but in fact – so-so. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

As regards the second instance, they are people who can speak English fluently and can use it in different kinds of activities, e.g. for academic purposes or at work.

According to the students, people with basic knowledge range from 15% to 80%. The numbers vary quite considerably, however, most numbers fall between 30% and 60%. As for people with advanced knowledge, most of the students suggested that they were 30% and less; and some students argued that they were not more than 2% - 5%.

Several students explained low numbers by demographic situation in Russia with big amount of older population:

А потому что большинство у нас пожилых людей, которые, естественно, не знают язык. Ну, пожилые люди – кроме учителей, конечно.

Because the majority are old people, who, naturally, do not know the language. Well, old people – except teachers, of course. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

There was an explanation that took into account the big number of children who just started learning English at school. And one student suggested the aforementioned factor that many people learnt other languages than English.

Furthermore, the students outlined a number of key factors which accounted for the low level of English language proficiency. And it is noteworthy that most of them are rooted in the context except for the laziness which, in fact, can also be partially explained by the low necessity to perform a certain activity in the particular context.

One of the key issues suggested by the students is that people in Russia do not need English language knowledge. Here are some of the students' comments on this point:

Много людей, которым просто не нужно это.

There are many people who do not need it. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Они говорят: «Нам это не нужно. Для чего нам это? Мы русский знаем».

They say: "We do not need it. What is the point in it? We know Russian". (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

Ну они, люди не чувствуют такой необходимости в этом, потому что всюду русский язык.

Well, they do not feel any necessity in it, because Russian is everywhere. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

According to the students people do not need English in their lives and more specifically in their working lives:

...по жизни просто людям... в большинстве, мне кажется, не сильно нужен английский язык, не требуется им просто.

...the majority of people, I suppose, do not need the English language very much in their lives, there is no need for it. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

Ну, он не всем нужен для... Ведь все изучают разные специальности... разные предметы только в рамках той специальности, на которую они претендуют. И во многие специальности не входит английский язык.

Well, not everybody needs it... All acquire different professions ... different subjects required for the profession they have chosen. And in many cases the English language is not a part of professional qualifications. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

Moreover, certain social groups, e.g. villagers or pensioners, need the English language even to a lesser degree:

Кому-то не надо. Кто-то не хочет... Кто-то не может. Не для всех надо. Ну зачем колхознику учить английский. Он все равно отсюда не уедет. Опять же говорю: с коровами и козами разговаривать?!

Some don't need. Some don't want.... Some can't. Not everybody needs it. Why should a collective farmer learn English? He won't ever leave his place. I say it again: to speak with cows and goats?! (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

А как бы пожилым людям ну очень редко когда очень нужно так прямо этот язык.

As for the older people, it is very seldom that they might need this language. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

These remarks require some comment. In Russia the level of salaries in the agricultural sector and pensions are so low that they do not allow these people to travel abroad.

By the way, the students argued that limited possibilities for travelling abroad result in low motivation to learn English among broader population as well.

Furthermore, prevalence of the Russian on TV is also among reasons, mentioned by the students, that significantly reduces people's opportunities to improve English language knowledge.

As can be seen from this general description of the context from the students' perspective, the Russian context basically does not provide the students with language patterns where English language learning and use could be characterized as common incontestable knowledge. For many people, it is still an activity not to be performed or not to spare extra effort on, unless they have clear vision where they will apply this kind of knowledge. And this state of things can't but impact students' decision on how deeply they should be involved in learning and using English.

Another key issue which cannot be left out is that according to most of the students there is an increase in the numbers of people who want to learn English or can speak it. One student commented on the social characteristics of these people in the following way:

Не знаю, если брать людей, например, которые вот сейчас где-то там работают на телевидении или где... ну вот в такой сфере, которая... то многие из них

знают английский, причем на хорошем уровне как бы. Вот. Ну, можно увидеть. Вот. Так что, может быть, медленно, но потихоньку как-то растет. То есть даже пусть не среди простых людей, а среди тех, кто где-то там высоко, но хотя бы они знают. То есть, если брать тот же Советский Союз, я не думаю, что там многие певцы знали в совершенстве английский язык, народные артисты.

Well, if we look at people, who, for example, now work on television or in such spheres where ... then many know English, what's more they know it very well. You can see it from time to time. So there is an improvement, maybe slow, but stable. And even though it is happening not among ordinary people, but among those who have better position in life, but at least they know. Take for example, the Soviet Union, I do not think that many singers, even people's artists, had a perfect knowledge of English. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Besides, some students said that high-ranking politicians, officials and businessmen could speak the English language:

Частенько встречается. И так как официальный язык, интернациональный, является именно английский, так что все, кто в политике, они должны его знать, потому что именно на английском идет общение.

You can see it quite often. And since English is an official, international language, everyone involved in politics, must know it, because communication is conducted in English. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

...ну, часто видишь, что вот они идут там вдвоем и разговаривают вдвоем, вот друг с другом. То есть рядом с ними нет ни переводчиков, ни корреспондентов, никого. Просто идут вдвоем, разговаривают. Это... ну, хорошо, наверное.

... well, you can see quite often, that they are walking together and speaking to each other. And there are no interpreters, or journalists, or anybody nearby. They are just walking together and speaking. Well ... it is good, I think. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Another student commented on spatial distribution of English language knowledge:

Ну в Москве там, конечно, я знаю, куча людей учат язык.

Well, in Moscow, of course ... I know that mass of people learn the language there. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

The students ascribed the tendency to the changes in political, economic and social conditions in Russia:

Наша страна развивающаяся. Приходят много иностранцев, поэтому в многих работах требуется английский язык.

[Russia] is a developing country. Many foreigners are coming, so in many jobs people need the English language. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

Так же увеличивается практика обмена опытом с другими странами.

The practice of experience exchange with other countries is increasing. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

As a result, more people feel the necessity of learning English:

Многие сейчас говорят, что очень английского языка не хватает.

Many people say now that they lack English language knowledge. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Another student reported on the change in the language policy:

Политика правительства такая. И выделяется больше часов в школе. Раньше было по два урока, а сейчас ввелось три.

It is the policy of the government. More hours are devoted [to foreign language learning] at school. Before – it was two hours [a week] and now – three. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Besides, the students explained the improvement of the situation by the “grassroots” tendencies:

За счет подрастающего поколения, которое интересуется и хочет добиться большего.

[The increase] is taking place due to younger generation who is interested and is eager to achieve something better. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

It can be seen that there are definite positive changes in the Russian context. What is also clear is that the process is going on quite slowly:

Может быть, растёт. Ну, медленно очень. Очень.

Maybe, it is growing [level of English language knowledge]. But very, very slowly. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

This last comment must be devoted special attention because it is important to understand why it takes a long time before the majority of people acquire high proficiency in the foreign language after the conditions have changed in favour of the foreign language. This will become clear when we examine foreign language acquisition from the point of view of human activity.

Conclusion

This section of the chapter examined the Russian context in relation to the English language from the students' perspective. The Russian students do not choose to learn or not to learn a foreign language since it is a compulsory subject of the school programme, and in most cases it is the parents who actually choose which foreign language will be learnt by the child. However, getting older and experiencing both the process of learning and the surrounding context each student forms his/her own opinion of the English language.

The concept of capital has proved to be useful for understanding the personal benefit to the students from learning and using the English language. It has also been shown that a foreign language can be laden with various types of capital depending on the parameters of the context. Moreover, the context determines how many people have access to each type of capital, thus influencing the extent of use of the foreign language.

The analysis of the Russian context shows that the context is not favourable for universal learning and use of the English language.

There is a wide gap between the discourse on the English language and the actual actions aimed at English language acquisition, that is, in spite of the fact that English language knowledge is highly valued, not so many people attain high proficiency in it.

Furthermore, it is argued that the context in Russia imposes certain constraints and does not let the possible capital of English language proficiency be realized into actual capital.

Concerning various types of capital, the situation is as follows. Some people perceive English as economic capital. No doubt, these people would invest considerable effort in order to make the language an efficient tool. In this way, economic capital is a powerful force for English language acquisition. Yet, not so many have opportunities to use English as economic capital. Many profit from English as social capital and there is a positive tendency in that. However, political and economic conditions still prevent many people to appreciate the social capital of English. With regard to English as cultural capital, which has the potential to embrace more people and influence them in the form of a cultural pattern, it is present to a very low degree in the Russian context.

Finally, the capital of the English language in Russia as perceived by people can be characterized as abstract, which means that people do not know definitely where and how they are going to use their knowledge and skills. They do not use the English language much at present, and do not know exactly when they are going to use it.

As a consequence many people are not motivated to acquire high proficiency in the English language, and not even to learn it.

6.2. Activity

It has been shown that the country context is crucial in determining the extent of foreign language use, thus regulating people's activity in relation to acquisition of a foreign language. However, in order to understand why context has so much impact on foreign language acquisition, we need to look more closely at the structure and development of human activity aimed at acquisition of a foreign language in general, and analyse the English language acquisition activity of the Russian students in particular.

Due to the fact that foreign language acquisition is taking place over rather a long period of time it is crucial to view it as a process in order to apprehend its structure. It is natural that any new activity starts with learning how to perform this activity. Learning activity gradually

leads to acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the new activity. Acquisition might be regarded as successful if a person attains a certain level when s/he can effectively perform the new activity using the acquired knowledge and skills. In other words, what starts with learning activity should result in use activity:

acquisition process = learning activity → use activity.

However, it is never a two stage process when at a certain point one activity transforms into another. Use activity might start very early in the acquisition process when a person applies knowledge and skills in practice. Likewise, learning activity can continue when a person is already able to carry out the new activity. It means that instead of viewing the acquisition process as learning activity which leads to use activity, we should use the formula:

acquisition process = learning activity (use activity) → use activity (learning activity),

where through the process the share of learning activity is reduced and the share of use activity grows.

This formula is particularly relevant to foreign language acquisition. Along with learning about phonetic, grammatical, lexical, etc. aspects of the language, a student learns phrases which s/he can use in practice right away. Conversely, high level of proficiency in a foreign language still leaves room for further learning, since the language is used in multiple domains and has multiple variations, e.g. dialects, which considerably expand linguistic material.

Needless to say, the amount of learning activity and its intensity is correlated with the speed of acquisition. Thus, the marked difference between acquisition of a mother tongue and a foreign language, apart from the fact that the processes take opposite developmental paths (Vygotsky 1986), is in the duration of learning activity. It is hard to imagine that a person could use as much time for learning a foreign language as the child who is constantly surrounded by the mother tongue. Consequently, foreign language learning activity, as a rule, lasts over a longer period of time (several years at school) and foreign language use activity is much more interwoven with learning activity as contrasted to the use of a mother tongue at later stages of life. What I want to underscore is that from the point of view of foreign

language acquisition this process should not be limited to learning activity stage but indispensably comprise use activity stage as well:

acquisition process = learning activity (use activity) + use activity (learning activity).

In spite of the fact that learning and use activities are closely interwoven, they are different types of activities with specific characteristics. According to Leont'ev (1978):

“Separate concrete types of activity may differ among themselves according to various characteristics: according to their form, according to the methods of carrying them out, according to their emotional intensity, according to their time and space requirements, according to their physiological mechanisms, etc. The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the difference of their objects.”

This is the case with foreign language learning and use activities which markedly differ in the objects they are directed at. The object of learning activity is a foreign language; whereas the object of use activity is not so much a foreign language as communication, entertainment, etc., depending on the type of activity performed with the use of a foreign language.

Bearing in mind that these activities are different with regard to their object, it would be then instructive to examine the difference in motives underlying these activities and the conditions under which they take place. As we shall see, Leont'ev's activity theory offers an illuminating way of examining the students' foreign language acquisition activity.

Let me first discuss the issues related to learning activity. A point should be made that I am analysing the learning activity of students which is taking place as a part of school curriculum in accordance with study programme. It means that learning is obligatory; planned, since the students have to cover certain material within a certain period of time; assessed, since the students are supposed to attain a certain level by a certain point of time; and directed by the teacher. Apparently, learning a foreign language on one's own or with a tutor has different characteristics.

Thus, while the motive of the learning activity at school is to learn a foreign language, the goal of the actions through which this activity is realized is to master a certain amount of

material within a certain time. There are some key issues that should be considered in this regard. They are related to the amount and kind of material learned during the studies course and the degree to which this material meets the students' needs.

The analysis of the interviews has shown that the students' perception of foreign language learning as regards what, how much and in what way the language should be learnt, might not always coincide with how the learning process is organized at school. For instance, some students think that foreign language studies course teaches only basic knowledge which is not enough for certain domains or certain activities. By way of illustration, I refer to the following comments:

...для профессии нужен специальный язык. Все равно вот, например, если человек будет там физиком или химиком, все равно школьных знаний ему никогда не хватит.

... one requires special language in professional activity. Anyway ... for example, if a person is going to be a physicist or a chemist, school knowledge [of English] will never be enough. (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

Я уже смотрю программы такие. И... ну там везде требуется отличный язык. Ну там английский, французский, смотря от страны. Ну, я хочу по обмену. Вот то что я хочу в другую страну, я вот поэтому и собираюсь получше учить уже сама. В школе этого не добьюсь.

I am looking for such programmes. And... high proficiency in a foreign language is an obligatory requirement [for all programmes]. English, French, depending on the country. I want to participate in an exchange programme. Well, because I want to go to another country, I am going to learn [English] more on my own. I will hardly achieve this goal by learning [the language] at school. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

Thus, many students stressed the importance of learning more words and the necessity to have more oral practice:

Как бы английский – это больше ты учишь слова. Чем больше запас, тем больше ты можешь сказать. Потому что схемы выучить особого труда не составляет.

English is for the most part learning words. The larger vocabulary you accumulate, the more you can say. Because it is not very difficult to learn grammar rules. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

Вот лично как я хочу английский язык знать: не то что грамматические правила, а чисто разговорную речь хочу знать. И из этого я пытаюсь не очень правила так

сильно выучивать, а пытаюсь больше слов узнавать, что мне позволит при разговоре.

As for me, how do I want to know the English language? Not so much the grammar rules but rather the spoken language. That's why I do not focus on learning rules, but try to learn more words, which can help me have a conversation. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Ну больше разговорный скорей хотелось бы, английского языка, так как вот эти все работы с листками там... так, второстепенное значение имеют для самого языка. По большей же части вот используется... если использовать действительно язык, то скорее в разговорной больше речи, чем в каких-нибудь текстовых работах.

I wish we learnt spoken English more, because all this practising with worksheets ... is of minor importance to the language. For the most part it is used ... if you really use the language – rather in oral speech than working with some texts. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

Мне кажется, урок должен вообще состоять как диалог между учителем и учеником. А зазубривание по учебнику – это глупо.

I think the lesson should be built as a dialogue between a teacher and a student. Learning by rote from the textbook is a stupid thing to do. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

Furthermore, the students stated that the amount of learning activity at school is not enough to attain high proficiency in a foreign language. As one of the students remarked:

Но вообще, если так вот сказать, реально, то трех часов, мне кажется, не хватает.

On the whole, from a realistic point of view, then three hours are not enough, I think. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

The frequency suggested by the students definitely exceeds the number of lessons they have according to the standard curriculum (3 lessons a week).

Ну я думаю, то что... чтобы английский знать в совершенстве, его надо каждый день практиковать.

Well, I think that ... to get high proficiency in English you should practice it every day. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Вообще, чтобы знать хорошо, наверное, нужно каждый день, чтобы постоянная была тренировка. Ну или хотя бы... ну вот хотя бы раз в два дня точно. То есть это должно быть часто, чтобы не терялся навык.

In general, to know [English] well, it is necessary to study every day in order to have constant practice. Well, at least ... at least every second day for sure. That is to say, it should be done often to keep skills sharp. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

And finally, some students argued that other forms of learning, e.g. with a tutor, could be more effective in comparison to learning a foreign language at school. The students, who had the experience of foreign language learning with a tutor, explained it in the following way:

Ну школьная программа не дает того, то что дают отдельные какие-то занятия. Она дает только основу, вот начало. А дополнительные, они как бы более углубленные. Больше там заданий, так же и примеров на это все... времени дается.

Well, the school studies course doesn't give what other classes give. It [school course] teaches only basic knowledge, the very beginning. As for the additional classes, they are more advanced with more tasks, examples ... and more time for it. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

...ну вот честно сказать, что... у меня получается, что от репетитора, в принципе, получаю больше, чем на уроке. Ну, я думаю, это в принципе ничего страшного, так как урок, он идет для всех. А тут ходишь к репетитору, он чисто для тебя. То есть ты уже работаешь в связи со своими возможностями, с тебя требуют так, как ты можешь. И... вот. А на уроке как-то все равно под всех подстраиваются.

... well, honestly speaking ... it happens so that I actually learn more from the tutor than at the lesson. Well, I think that this is quite natural because the lesson is for all students. As regards the tutor, he is just for you. So you work according to your abilities, and you are asked to do what you can do. And ... well. At the lesson [the teacher] has to adjust to all the students. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

The point is that individual lessons with a tutor might not only ensure deeper knowledge of the subject, but can also guarantee student-centred learning because for a tutor it is much easier to take into account the student's abilities and needs than it is for a teacher in a class of, say, 15 students.

As can be seen from the students' comments, foreign language learning at school can hardly lead to high proficiency in a foreign language, to no small degree because of limited time devoted to foreign language learning. What is more, in many cases the objective of the school curriculum does not coincide with the goal of the students, even those ones who do not

require deep knowledge of a foreign language but, for example, would like to attain a level sufficient for communication in a foreign language.

However, content with the choice of the material or not, interested in it or not, the students can not change it as the activity is directed by the teacher. Besides, they have to follow the studies course even if they are not satisfied with the teaching method or some of its aspects because foreign language learning is obligatory.

Another key feature of the learning activity in the school context is that it is assessed. In this case students' actions might be linked to the motive of performance and, thus, constitute a different activity, with a grade as its object. The following comment is an example of this kind of activity:

Если б я, например, не поленилась, повторила все, у меня было бы по тесту не «три», а «пять». Но у меня «три». Первую «тройку» получила за эту четверть вообще. Шестнадцать «пятерок», а тут «тройка»!

If I, for instance, hadn't been lazy and revised everything, I would have got 'five' instead of 'three' on the test. But I have got 'three'. The first 'three' in this term. Sixteen 'fives', and now 'three'!¹ (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

This activity can run parallel with foreign language learning activity or can substitute it if a student is not so much interested in foreign language learning but wants to complete the studies course with a good grade.

As Lantolf (2000:12) has put it: "... different activities might be underway at any given time, despite the fact that all of the participants display the same or similar overt behavior in a task." Thus, students who demonstrate active participation in the learning process might have different motives (learning the language to take an exam, learning the language because of personal interest, or learning the language to get a good grade) and, therefore, be engaged in activities other than learning activity.

However, not every student demonstrates active participation in the learning process. We can

¹ According to the academic grading system in Russia, 'five' means "excellent, 'three' means "satisfactory".

assume that the motive for students who do not participate actively might just be completion of the studies course with an acceptable grade because even if a student is not interested in learning a foreign language at all, s/he has to comply with this activity as foreign language learning at school is compulsory.

The important features of the foreign language learning activity in the school context I have just outlined are employed to demonstrate how the context conditions the nature of the students' activity. It should be noted that the school context exerts this kind of impact on the overall learning activity of the students, in general, and on the foreign language learning activity of the students, in particular, regardless of some variation among the schools where I conducted the research. In order to create a more detailed understanding of how this kind of learning activity operates, it is, however, important to define its nature.

I adhere to Apple's (2004:78) view when he says that: "... it is the meanings attached to the category of work which most clearly illuminate the possible place of schools in the complex nexus of economic and social institutions which surrounds us all" and I think that the category of work is very helpful in grasping the nature of the learning activity of the students. Indeed, it has the attributes characteristic of work activity. First of all, the learning activity takes place regularly for a certain period of time at a certain point of time. Furthermore, the student has to carry out the learning activity, no matter how s/he feels about it. In addition, the student has to comply with the content of the learning activity and follow the directions of the teacher. On top of everything else, the student is supposed to demonstrate good performance.

Naturally, the nature of the learning activity has implications for how the students perceive it. I will focus on two issues that are related to perception of the learning activity as work and have a direct bearing on the implementation of learning activity.

First and foremost, the learning activity, including the foreign language learning activity, is intricately bound with the application of efforts. It is no wonder that every student has to make efforts to a greater or lesser degree because it is hard to expect that a student should have the same readiness to perform the learning activity through the whole studies course. The material might not be interesting or it can be difficult to understand and master. Besides, orientation of work activity on product as its integral component is a powerful organizer of

students' activity. It means that the student should not only perform the learning activity for a certain period of time which alone might involve effort but also achieve some result which might require extra effort. The following comment strongly supports this argument:

Если ты хочешь чего-то добиться, нужно стараться, идти к этому, то есть «без труда не выловишь рыбку из пруда», как есть такая русская пословица.

If you want to achieve something, you should make efforts, pursue your goal, that is, “You cannot pull a fish out of a pond without labour” (No pains, no gains), as the Russian proverb says. (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

As can be seen from this quote, the student connected goal attainment with effort making and defined the learning activity as labour.

Furthermore, the students opposed diligence to laziness and shared the view that application of efforts is an important factor in achieving good results in the foreign language learning activity. By way of illustration, I refer to the following comments:

Учить его надо. Упорно.

One must learn it [foreign language]. Assiduously. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Влияет фактор самого человека, если он... как он работает. ...Как он трудится и все.

Personal factor is important, if the person ... how much he works. ... How much he labours, and all this. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Есть один мальчик. Вот. Он умный на самом деле. Он не глупый совершенно. Но он ленится. Потому что лень – это самый большой стопор.

There is one boy. Well. He is in fact clever. He is not dull at all. But he is lazy. Because laziness is the major impediment [in the learning process]. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Moreover, application of efforts is considered a more important factor in foreign language learning than individual abilities. The students were convinced that everyone can learn a foreign language, and application of efforts can well compensate for some variation in individual abilities among students. Not to mention the fact that practice has a positive effect on development of abilities involved in foreign language learning. Thus, when asked to

comment on the argument “I have no gift for languages” which some people put forward to explain their poor results, the students responded in the following way:

Фраза неправильная. Способности, они у каждого человека есть, но в разной степени развиты. И человек, если будет тренироваться, стараться изучить этот язык, то способности будут расти и расти у человека.

This is an erroneous statement. Every person has abilities, but they are developed to a different degree. If a person practises, makes efforts to learn this language, his abilities will improve and improve. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

Это предубеждение. Это... просто или лень человека, или то что... ну, не знаю как-то. Да есть все у нас способности. Главное, захотеть.

This is a prejudice. This is ... either a person's laziness, or ... well, I do not know. All of us have the necessary abilities. The main thing is to want [to learn]. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

As we can see, the students believe that application of efforts is not only necessary but crucial in foreign language learning. For some students application of efforts can even start acting as a brake on learning activity in spite of the fact that the student believes that it is important to learn a foreign language:

Я все прекрасно понимаю, то что это нужно учить, это нужно к поступлению. Как бы тяжело все равно...

I understand very well, that it is important to learn it [English], that it might be necessary for entry to higher education. But it is so hard... (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

It is, thus, clear that desire to perform the activity is not enough for implementation of this activity, especially the one which is demanding.

Let me now turn to the other issue that is related to perception of the learning activity as work and which in some way occurs as a consequence of the first one. This issue concerns the category of time.

Apart from the fact that through daily practices people learn to take notice and count how much time has been spent on work, the time which they spend on an activity that requires effort is even more acutely felt in terms of its flow and amount. One of the students who was

working hard to improve his proficiency in English in order to take an exam, said that he would like to keep his level after the exam as well. The remark he made in this regard is of interest:

Но забывать бы совсем-то уж не хотелось. То есть... ну обидно просто столько времени долбить, добиться чего-то, а потом так – хоп и все.

I do not want to forget if completely. Well ... it would be of great pity to struggle for such a long time, achieve something, and then ... drop it. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

This quote vividly demonstrates that when an activity requires effort, both time and energy turn into a kind of investment. It is not surprising then that a person expects certain gains or rewards from this activity.

It is, however, noteworthy that not all students invest their time and energy with the same degree of willingness since the attitude to the learning activity might vary. Thus, when a student is interested in an activity, s/he does not regret about the amount of time spent. And, conversely, when a student has to carry out an activity that does not interest him/her, the student might get a feeling that s/he is forced to give away something that belongs to him/her. This can be exemplified by the following comment:

...мне, допустим, очень нравится физика, и поэтому я больше внимания уделяю физике, чем нежели английскому языку. Английский язык я никогда не запускала. То есть если задали, то задали, значит, я сделаю. Значит, я буду сидеть разбираться, пожертвую своим временем...

... I, for example, like Physics very much, that's why I would rather spend more time on Physics than on the English language. I have never neglected the English language though. If I get homework to do, then I will do it. It means that I will be sitting and trying to understand it, I will sacrifice my time... (Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Furthermore, I assume that in contrast to some recreation activity when a person should use effort to terminate it, an activity that requires effort needs extra motivation in case it has to be performed beyond the set limit. The illustration given below should make this point clear. As I have mentioned before, some students argued that the amount of time allocated to foreign language learning at school is not enough to acquire high level of proficiency. So I asked the students whether there should be more lessons of a foreign language per week. The general

opinion was that the amount of instruction in foreign language they had then was enough. They explained that the school should provide students with basic knowledge and those students who are interested to know more can do it in addition to the school curriculum and learning taking place at school:

Если человеку надо, он и вне школы будет узнавать английский язык или другой какой-либо.

If a person needs it, he will learn the English language or another language outside school too. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Если у человека есть стремление язык изучать, ему и одного часа хватит, если он сам будет к этому стремиться.

If a person has a desire to learn the language, even one hour will be enough for him, in case he makes efforts [to learn the language] himself. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

As regards those who do not want to learn the language, they will hardly improve their proficiency no matter how many lessons they have:

Потому что, если человеку это не надо, он, в принципе, не будет этим заниматься. Сколько бы часов не было. Если халтурит, так и будет халтурить.

Because if a person doesn't need it, he will not in principle do it. No matter how many hours are assigned to it [learning]. If a person cuts corners, he will continue doing it. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Хоть пять часов введешь, а людям неохота заниматься.

You can allot even five hours [a week], but it will make no difference if people do not want to learn. (Sergei, school D, 22.10.2010)

It seems that when work is concerned, people regard their time and energy as resources that are limited. Consequently, they carefully consider where to direct the energy and how much time to spend on a certain activity. Thus, when asked if there should have been more lessons of a foreign language, some students replied that the number of lessons should not be increased, because otherwise it will “overload” or “overburden” them.

As has been shown, efforts required to perform the learning activity and the resulting disinclination to devote extra time and energy on the learning activity might have implications

for the implementation of the learning activity. These factors might be considered as limitations of the learning activity on a personal level.

At this point we should address the question in what circumstances a person will take effort to learn a foreign language in spite of these limitations. This is where the category of capital comes on the scene. As I have mentioned before, economic capital has a potential to influence English language acquisition. One of the students commented on this point:

Если в работе нужен английский, то волей-неволей люди пойдут, потому что каждый хочет заработать лишнюю копейчку.

If English is necessary for work, people will start [learning English] no matter whether they want it or not, because everyone wants to earn some extra money. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

The students cannot acquire economic capital at the moment since they have not finished their studies yet. However, they can aspire to jobs where proficiency in English is a requirement. Thus, for the time being the goal to accumulate linguistic capital (foreign language knowledge and skills) and cultural capital (examination grade, educational qualifications), which can later be converted into economic capital (Ó Riagáin 1997), compels a student to invest extra energy into the learning activity. Besides, such areas as education and professional life, where a foreign language is used, as a rule require high level of proficiency in this language. Hence, a person will concentrate on the learning activity to meet these requirements. By contrast, social capital and cultural capital in themselves do not necessarily require high levels of foreign language proficiency, and so to a lesser degree compel a person to focus on the learning activity. One of the students made the following comment:

Кто-то заинтересован просто сдать ЕГЭ. То он, соответственно, наверное, и... как бы готовится именно к ЕГЭ. То есть ему не важно там... ну, все остальное. То есть то, что вот будет там, все вот эти, какие-то нормы, все. А тот, кто хочет просто язык выучить, мне кажется, ему все интересно, что связано с этим языком. Ну, то есть все его стороны.

Some persons might be interested in just passing the USE¹. It means that this person ... studies for the USE. Everything else is not important for him. He concentrates on

¹USE (Unified State Exam) in a foreign language is not an obligatory graduation examination in the Russian educational system.

the material that will be checked at the exam. As for people who want to learn the language, I think they are interested in everything connected with this language, that is, in all its aspects. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

We can also discern in this quote that the type of capital might not only influence the degree of a student's involvement in the learning activity but also the preference given to the learning or use activity. It is quite understandable that a person who exerts oneself to master the foreign language to pass an exam with a good result might not have time for the foreign language use activity (e.g. communication in the Internet or reading books). Vice versa, students might use a foreign language quite actively without spending much time on the formal learning activity.

It can be concluded then that in case of economic capital it is a convergence of personal interest and demands on high proficiency that necessitate a student to make extra effort in the foreign language learning activity in spite of its challenging nature.

Let me discuss this point just a bit more. Surely the position which a foreign language will hold in the future profession makes a difference for it determines the extent of use and the level of proficiency. Compare, for example, the required level of foreign language proficiency of a professional interpreter and of an employee in an international company where a foreign language is a working language.

There is, however, another factor that has serious implications for the student's activity, and this is the time remoteness of the goal. Since people cannot endure stress caused by application of efforts for unlimited period of time they regulate application of efforts in accordance with the point in time when this goal should be achieved. And if it is the graduation examination in a foreign language, e.g. the USE, which will take place by the end of the school year, the application of efforts to attain certain level of proficiency should be expected to be high. For instance, one of the students, who was going to sit for the USE in English, had additional classes with a tutor.

Other students, who said that they would need the English language at a later period, e.g. while getting higher education, revealed less involvement in the foreign language learning activity. The following is an illustration of this statement:

...я собираюсь поступать в университет, который не связан с английским языком, поэтому у меня больший акцент идет на другие предметы, такие как физика, математика.

... I am going to enter the university which is not bound up with the English language, that's why I focus more on the other subjects, such as Physics and Mathematics.
(Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

Before this same student had made the following remark:

То есть, допустим, я вот собираюсь поступать в университет, не связанный с английским языком, но вдруг мне там не понравится, и я захочу передумать и поступить на другой факультет какой-то. Конечно же, это тоже мне ну как... потребуется.

Well, I am, for example, going to enter the university which is not bound up with the English language. But what if I do not like it there, and I change my mind, and decide to enter some other faculty. Certainly, I will need it [proficiency in English] there.
(Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

The other student expressed the same attitude, and what is more, you will see that the choice of the words is very similar:

Но я вот сейчас, в 11-ом классе, не ставлю акцент на иностранном языке, потому что он при поступлении мне не нужен. ...Мне при поступлении не потребуется, а дальше потребуется.

At present, in the eleventh grade, I do not focus on the foreign language, because I do not need it for entry [to higher education]. ... I do not need it for entry, but I will need it after that. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Less focus on the foreign language learning activity does not necessarily lead to poor results. A student might carry out all the tasks given by the teacher and have good grades. However, quite often less focus does result in somewhat lower level of performance.

Furthermore, a student might plan to focus on the foreign language learning activity at a later period to attain the level necessary for the use of a foreign language. Thus, one of the students, who was considering the possibilities to study abroad and expressed a strong wish to live abroad, said:

Ну я еще так сильно-то не изучаю. ...собираюсь получше учить...

Well, I do not focus on learning [English] now. ... I am going to learn it more...
(Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

It is not clear though when it will happen and if the student will have the opportunities to perform this activity.

In summary, the point in time when a student will need to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language influences the degree of involvement in the foreign language learning activity.

Having considered learning activity on a personal level, it is important at this point to place it in a context in order to understand what position a personal factor occupies among other factors which influence the foreign language learning activity. I shall also demonstrate what factors are most significant in making foreign language learning within the school context successful.

First and foremost, the students were unanimous that the teacher plays an important role in the foreign language learning activity. The following comments vividly illustrate this kind of attitude:

Все зависит от учителя. Как он преподаст свой предмет, так и мы будем знать его.

All depends on the teacher. As the teacher teaches the subject, so we will know it.
(Anna, school A, 13.10.2010)

И все равно, мне кажется, все зависит от учителя: как преподает учитель этот английский язык.

On the whole, I think that everything depends on the teacher: the way the teacher teaches the English language. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

As far as I can judge from the students' comments professionalism of the teacher is of considerable importance. It is, however, noteworthy that the students placed emphasis not so much on the teacher's knowledge of the foreign language as on the way the teacher transmits this knowledge which implies the teacher's skills both to explain the material and to present the material:

...как учитель ведет. Допустим, вот... ну просто так бывает, что ты... Ну вот такой человек, что его не воспринимаешь, что он говорит. То есть вот нет и все. Ну никак не идет. То здесь явно... хорошего ничего не выйдет.

... how the teacher conducts [the lesson]. For instance, well ... it happens that you.... Well, it can be such a person, that you do not understand what he is saying. You just don't understand and can't do anything about it. Well, then obviously ... nothing good can come out of it. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

У нас сейчас проходил практику из пединститута вот. Один раз мы прошли с преподавателем нашим. На следующий день мы прошли уже с практиканткой. С ней гораздо было интересней. Она ну более близко к нам по возрасту, и проблемы наши знает, и более интересно обсуждать с ней. Как преподносится.

A student from the teachers' training institute has been doing practical training with us. First, we studied the material with our teacher. Next day we studied this material with the student teacher. It was much more interesting with her. She is much closer to our age, and knows our problems, and it was more interesting to discuss with her. The way it [material] is presented. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

The students attached no less importance to how the teacher organizes the learning process:

Если это строгость есть... вот присутствует строгость вся, и организованность... каждый будет то же самое домашнее задание, каждый будет учить слова.

If there is strictness ... strictness is present and good organization ... everyone will do home task, everyone will learn words. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

Как бы год назад у нас был учитель такой, что ну мы с ним ничего как бы не выучили по сравнению с тем, что мы выучили за эту четверть. У нас колоссальный как бы идет прогресс, вот. Потому что один учитель просто спрашивает, ну особо не уделяет внимания, или... объяснять то ли не умеет. Плюс думает, что мы будем честными. ...спрашивает, например: «Дети, вы выучили?» Мы все киваем «да». – «Ну, тогда не будем спрашивать». Понятно, что мы не будем в следующий раз это учить. Вот. И поэтому как бы, не учишь, и, следовательно, ничего не знаешь. А тут попробуй не выучи как бы, с этим учителем, сразу «два» либо еще на пересдачу. В общем, всегда учишь. Как бы... это, наверное, единственный предмет, который я учу всегда как бы.

For example, a year ago we had a teacher, well, we didn't learn anything with him if you compare with what we have learnt this term. We are making tremendous progress now. This is because one teacher just asks, without paying special attention to... or maybe can't explain well. Besides, he thinks that we will be honest. ... he can ask, for example: "Children, have you learnt this [material at home]?" We all nod 'yes'. "Well, then I won't check [how you know] this." Clearly, we won't do this [home work] next time. Thus, you do not learn, and, as a result, you don't know anything. As for the teacher we have now: just try one time not to learn [home work]. You instantly

get ‘two’¹ or have to retake it. In sum, you always do [home work]. Well ... this is probably the only subject which I always learn. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

As we can see from these quotes, the teacher can create such conditions that a student would feel it necessary to work hard not only at the lesson but also at home. And if we take into account that memorizing material is an essential part of foreign language learning and the amount of material does not allow learning everything at the lesson, it is crucial that a student should work on one’s own in addition to formal instruction.

Furthermore, bearing in mind that the learning activity is related to the category of ‘work’, effectiveness turns out to be an important parameter of the learning activity. And since it is the teacher who is in charge of organizing the learning activity, the outcome of the learning activity depends largely on the teacher’s skills to organize it in the most efficient way.

Secondly, the general opinion among the students was that the teaching method employed by the teacher also plays an important role in foreign language learning. As one of the students put it:

Потому что бывает, ну, без нормальной методики можно хоть как трудиться и все равно получится что-то непонятное.

The point is that achievements are unlikely to be high no matter how hard a person works unless a good method is used. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

The students pointed to various aspects of teaching methods which, in their opinion, influence the results of the foreign language learning activity, among them:

- the amount of learning material;
- the intensity of the learning process;
- types of activities employed during lesson.

It is necessary to note here that a teacher can regulate these parameters of the learning activity even if prescribed to follow a fixed curriculum. Hence, a teacher can significantly influence

¹According to the academic grading system in Russia, ‘two’ means “unsatisfactory”.

the outcome of learning. This is another example of the important role of the teacher in the learning activity.

Third, the students believed that learning materials play an important role in the learning activity. Evidently, the way the material is presented in the textbook influences how it is mastered. One of the students praised the textbooks they were using at her school and compared them with other textbooks:

Я посмотрела просто учебники, ну помогала подруге писать что-то. Вот. Я посмотрела – это ужасные учебники. Они какие-то совершенно не систематизированные. Там если они проходили пассивный залог в 8-ом классе, в 9-ом, в учебнике этого нет.

I had a look at those textbooks when I helped my friend to write something. Well. I had a look – they were terrible textbooks. They were not systematized at all. For example, if they learnt Passive Voice in the eighth grade, in the ninth grade there was nothing about it in the textbook. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Besides, linguistic and thematic variety of learning materials can help get profound foreign language knowledge. One of the students explained it in the following way:

...мне кажется, что чем разнообразнее, тем лучше. Ну даже если будет все только об одном, например, о книгах, это же неинтересно. То есть получается, что уже идет... узкое только ты понимаешь... А когда разные все, постоянно, ты как-то.. лучше это. Другое... слова другие, вокабуляр разный абсолютно.

... I think the more variety the better. If it is about one subject, for example, books, it won't be interesting. As a result, you understand only limited [area].... It is better when [topics] are different. Other ... different words, vocabulary is completely different. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

The students also held the opinion that learning materials should be relevant to their life because in this case they would acquire knowledge that could be applied in real situations:

Тексты, ну такие... жизненные. И по темам, тоже которые касаются нас. Там от культуры до старости... Они пишут и должны писать те темы, которые ну легко понять и они пригодятся как-то.

Texts should be ... true to life ... and deal with topics that concern us. From culture to old age... They [authors of textbooks] include and must include those topics that are easy to understand and that will be useful in some way. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

It should be noted that the students expressed different attitudes to the content of their textbooks in terms of interest. Some of them regarded the textbooks or certain topics as interesting. Others were rather indifferent to the content. Still others were critical of certain topics and described them as dull and uninteresting. Nevertheless, it seems that interesting or entertaining content is of secondary importance to the students in comparison with the effectiveness of the learning materials in teaching a foreign language and its applicability in life. And even those students, who liked the choice of topics and issues, specified that this information and linguistic material might be very useful in communication with people:

Учебник вот у нас сейчас новый. Он, конечно, очень сложный... Но мне нравится то, что действительно мы изучаем какие-то вопросы... То есть не то что как раньше там: учим «Англия», у нее там герб... А что мы именно учим какие-то проблемные темы: там вот отношения взрослых и детей, разные поколения, вот направления. То есть именно то, что непосредственно может пригодится при общении, допустим, со сверстниками, в том же Интернете где-то.

We have a new textbook now. It is quite difficult.... But I like that we study different issues.... Not as before when we learnt, for example, about England, its coat of arms.... We are learning such important topics as relationships between adults and children, different generations, such topics. That is such things which might be useful in communication with peers, in the Internet, for instance. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

А который учебник у нас, я считаю, что он очень грамотно построен, так как содержание текстов различное: про учебу, про науку, про социальные какие-то проблемы. Про известных людей. Ты узнаешь как можно больше в мире, плюс у тебя расширяется твой кругозор, ты можешь говорить на разные темы с обывателем. Ты можешь говорить про природу, про науку, про все.

I think that our textbook is very cleverly compiled because of the variety of the text: about studies, science, social problems. Famous people. You learn a lot about the world, plus you broaden your outlook, and you can talk on different topics with an average person. You can talk about nature, science, about everything. (Roman, school C, 20.10.2010)

This discussion suggests that the students perceive learning materials as a means of foreign language learning rather than a source of information.

Finally, it is highly relevant to add that it is the school that determines the choice of the textbooks for the particular subject. However, a teacher on his/her own initiative can employ additional materials in accordance with the eagerness to improve the learning process and

his/her experience. This is still another example of the important role of the teacher in the learning activity.

I have outlined a set of factors that have a strong impact on the students' foreign language learning activity and hence are related to the outcome of this activity.

We can now move on to the discussion about what levels of the context are most influential in determining the parameters of the foreign language learning activity.

To begin with, I would like to note that the country context is common to all the students, consequently exerts the same influence on them. As I argued before, the country context has enormous influence on how many people want to learn the foreign language and are ready to invest efforts into this activity. However, even if there were no incentives to learn the foreign language in the country context, the students would still learn it because it is an obligatory part of the school curriculum. From this we can conclude that the country context has an indirect influence on the foreign language learning activity of the students. The same applies to the town context which is also common to all the students and has an indirect influence.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the influence of the family context on the foreign language learning activity. Suffice it to say that the economic status of the family and the educational background of parents might have a significant influence on both the understanding of the importance of foreign language knowledge and the need for this knowledge.

Furthermore, the analysis of the factors that impact the students' foreign language learning activity clearly demonstrates what a significant role the teacher plays in the learning process. This might suggest that it is the class context rather than the school context that has the most significant influence on the learning activity. Thus, in one and the same school there is a variation in the learning activity in classes with different teachers. And the variation in the learning activity among the schools is rather due to different teachers than to different school contexts. The following quote is the illustration of this statement:

...уровень преподавания английского ведь во всех школах очень разный. В некоторых он очень низкий. Даже в одной школе может быть разный, абсолютно, уровень образования, преподавания.

... the level of teaching of the English language varies considerably from one school to another. It is very low in some schools. Even if we take one school, the level of education, the level of teaching can be totally different. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

This statement concerns the schools which follow the standard curriculum. School C, however, should be considered separately, because it has a specialized curriculum with extended amount of instruction and specially selected learning materials. Besides, I would assume that the students of this school are to somewhat greater degree willing to learn the foreign language than students of other schools since they attend this particular school. Therefore, we can expect that the proficiency level of the students is generally higher than that of students in other schools. As one of the students put it:

...ну, знаем-то лучше, чем в других школах.

... well, we surely know [English] better than [students] in other schools. (Pavel, school C, 20.10.2010)

However, even within this particular school there might be a variation in the learning activity of the students who are taught by different teachers (see the quotation by student 10 on p.14).

School D requires some comment as well. This school specializes in Computer Studies. It also means that the students have profound knowledge of the Internet and easier access to it at school in comparison with students of other schools. Nonetheless, I have not detected that it has any impact on the foreign language learning activity of the students. There might be two explanations of this fact. The first one is that the speed of the Internet connection still leaves much to be desired. Second, it is up to the teacher to use this additional resource, and there might be various reasons why it is not done.

In sum, the analysis provides evidence of the important role of the teacher who is on the one hand restricted in his/her activities by the curriculum, and on the other hand if desired can significantly improve the learning process by means of teaching methods and additional learning materials.

As for the students, they are free to regulate the degree of their involvement in the learning activity in accordance with their personal goals and attitude to the teaching method adopted by the teacher.

The implication for the foreign language learning activity is that the teacher and the student share responsibility of the learning activity and its outcome.

We can only speculate upon the future of the foreign language learning activity when the school context is not in place any more: if it will continue in any other form or will be integrated into use activity. It is also hard to predict the scope of foreign language use activity. However, as I argued before, use activity can already start on a very early stage of the acquisition process when a person applies knowledge and skills in practice. This made it possible to collect data on foreign language use activity as well.

Returning to the analysis of foreign language acquisition activity from the perspective of activity theory, I would like to reiterate the aforesaid statement that the object of use activity is different from that of learning activity. In case of use activity the object is not so much a foreign language as communication, entertainment, etc., depending on the type of activity performed with the use of a foreign language. And even though the activities where a foreign language is involved are very different, still there are common features they share. What is more, these features clearly distinguish use activity from learning activity.

Let me first specify the types of use activities which I am going to analyse. They are as follows:

- communication;
- reception/accumulation of information;
- entertainment.

Before analysing these activities, some points of explanation are necessary. Since these activities are performed by students, communication in a foreign language does not extend to those cases when it takes place in workplaces and apparently has different character than communication carried out by students in casual situation, as, e.g., communication with

friends in the Internet or foreigners abroad. Furthermore, due to the fact that *Content and Language Integrated Learning*, which is teaching other subjects through a foreign language (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2007:24), is not practiced in Russian schools, at least, not that I know of, and definitely not in those schools where the research took place, not to mention exchange programmes, which is still quite a rare phenomenon in Russian schools, the students receive information in a foreign language, e.g., read articles in the Internet, only on one's own initiative in their free time. Lastly, by entertainment I mean such activities as watching films in a foreign language, listening to songs in a foreign language, etc.

After I have specified foreign language use activities performed by the students, I can enumerate the features that pertain to all of these activities. Firstly, these activities are not obligatory which means that they are solely performed because the person is interested or willing to perform these activities. Secondly, they are not directed from outside, that is to say, the person him/herself decides on the content of activity. Thirdly, they are not supposed to follow a fixed schedule. Thus, not only regularity and duration of the activities can vary, but they can be terminated at any point of time. Finally, the goal of activity is not consciously formulated; as a result, the activities are rather flexible, with focus on the process rather than on the product of activity (Dewey 1910).

Just as it was with learning activity, defining the nature of use activity might help more fully understand how this type of activity operates. I would suggest defining the aforesaid foreign language use activities as leisure activities since all of them take place in the free time of students. This point raises an important issue connected with time allocation for these activities.

There is no doubt that necessary (like eating, sleeping) and obligatory activities have a powerful influence on how people's lives are organized because people have to perform them. Thus, the question is how much free time a person has got after performing these activities. Concerning students who are in the last grade of school and, therefore, are preparing for the graduation examinations, there might not be so much free time left. As one of the students put it:

Потому что планы сейчас все: это поступление, поступление, экзамены. ...Достаточно мало времени на что-то вообще. Приходится все учить, учить, и днем, и ночью.

Because all the efforts now are directed at the entry [to higher education], entry, examinations. ... There is very little time for anything else. It is necessary to learn, learn, day and night. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

Accordingly, most of the students spoke of lack of time. However, it is reasonable to expect that there should still be some free time which the students use in accordance with their personal interests and desires. Without going into detail concerning what students actually do in their free time, I would argue that the variety of activities is so vast, and normally activities, in which a person is interested, exceed what s/he can actually do. A person therefore has to make choices. I would call this continuous process the competition among interests and desires which should underscore the selective nature of human leisure activity.

The importance of interest and desire for the use activity is another issue that cannot be left out. Due to the fact that the aforesaid use activities are not compulsory, interest and desire become those forces that actually bring these activities into action. Thus, when asked to explain why certain use activities are not performed, a student responded:

Ну это от личных черт человека. Начиная оттого, нежелания, может... или неинтересно ему это.

Well, it depends on the individual traits of the person. To begin with, it can be unwillingness ... or it is not interesting for him. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

It means that if there is a lack of interest and desire, an activity might not be performed at all.

It should be noted that the issues I have just outlined refer to all leisure activities. Let me now discuss the factors that might have a negative effect on implementation of foreign language use activities into practice, that is to say factors that constrain a person from performing certain activities in a foreign language, although the same activities might be vastly performed in the native language.

It is beyond any doubt that proficiency is a significant factor that facilitates implementation of the foreign language use activity. And, conversely, lack of knowledge can hinder and even

eliminate the use activity completely. While conducting interviews, I was, however, rather surprised that even students with high proficiency did not apply their knowledge and skills to the extent one might have expected from them. There are obviously other important factors which I will try to single out here.

Henceforth, I am going to analyse leisure activities separately because even though I put them in one group, they serve different purposes, and consequently have different parameters and limitations.

I am going to follow the aforementioned succession and start with communication. Here I mean interpersonal communication among individuals conducted through the means of a language, which can be both face-to-face and distant, e.g. over the telephone, in the Internet, depending on the way it is performed.

When the number of foreigners in Russia is taken into account, it becomes clear that for many people the Internet offers the only possibility to communicate in the English language. It does not seem that it is a problem to find people for communication purposes in the Internet. As one student said:

Там те же социальные сети, которые международные. Ты можешь найти и спокойно общаться, я думаю. Там много дружелюбных людей, которым интересно пообщаться с людьми с другого континента.

There are international social networks. I think you can easily find [a person] and communicate [with him/her]. There are many friendly people there, who would be interested to communicate with people from another continent. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

Moreover, the level of proficiency appears to be of secondary importance. A person might adjust this kind of use activity to his/her level of proficiency, choosing among written and oral forms, and searching for those people with whom s/he can from a linguistic point of view communicate without difficulty.

However, as I have mentioned before, only few students had tried to communicate or communicated in the Internet in English. As for those who did not communicate, they expressed a positive attitude to communication in the Internet, more importantly some of

them would like and even plan to start communicating. And only one student was not so much interested in this kind of use activity on the grounds that he doubted if he would ever need to apply such communicative skills in his life.

Let me now mention some of the students' arguments as to why they did not use their foreign language knowledge and skills in this kind of activity. One student said that she didn't have the necessary programmes and did not know how to use them. I assume that it should not present much of a difficulty to solve this problem. As regards another student, it was a psychological barrier that prevented her from starting to communicate:

Потому что, во-первых, не знаешь, о чем говорить с этими людьми, потому что абсолютно другая психология, другой менталитет. Что им сказать... «Привет! Как дела?» - банально, как-то не хочется. И вот просто страх общения, как я неоднократно сказала.

Firstly, you do not know what to talk about with these people because the psychology, mentality are different. What to tell them... "Hi! How are you?" – it sounds trite, and you don't want to do it. Besides, because of fear of communication, as I have mentioned more than once before. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

The most common argument was, however, lack of time. I am sure that there is certain truth about it. I have already written about graduation examinations the students have to take by the end of the year. But could it not also be an excuse? It was one of the student's responses that made me think this way:

R – Среди молодежи, с кем ты общаешься, практикуется такой вид общения?

S – С иностранными?

R – Ну, для начала, скажем, с русскими.

S – С русскими – каждый!

R – Каждый?

S – Мне кажется, да.

R – В каких программах?

S – В основном, это ICQ. Многие через Skype. И... ну и «Контакт», вот это mail.

R – А с иностранцами кто-то пробует?

S – С иностранцами... есть, конечно, но это редкие случаи.

R – Is this type of communication widely spread among young people whom you know?

S – [Communication] With foreigners?

R – Well, let it be Russians first.

S – With Russians – everyone.

R – Everyone?

S – I think so.

R – In what programmes?

S – In most cases it is ICQ. Many in Skype. Well, ... also "Kontakt", mail.

R – Does anyone try [to communicate] with foreigners?

S – With foreigners ... it certainly happens, but very seldom.

(R – researcher, S – student) (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

We might conclude that students find time to communicate in Russian, what is more, they do it very actively. However, I would argue that it is not just communication in Russian but communication with the members of immediate social relations, and most likely friends. Thus, it is not only English vs Russian, but also remote vs close, unknown vs familiar, impersonal vs personal. Apparently, relationships with friends from the immediate social environment are more meaningful than with people who live far away. Besides, it is much easier to communicate in the Internet with people whom one has met in real life. The following comment, which one of the students made, explaining why she did not communicate with foreigners in the Internet, supports this argument:

...Да еще и знакомых нет из-за границы.

... Besides, I do not have any acquaintances abroad. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

It seems also reasonable to argue that the aforementioned psychological barrier arises due to the same unknown, impersonal image of people one can meet in the Internet.

Thus, the discussion suggests that one of the forces, that induces a person to start communication with foreigners in the Internet, might be strong interest in new and unknown, for example, interest in people from other cultures.

The next type of foreign language use activity to be considered is reception/accumulation of information. And while the resources in English are easily accessible through the Internet, few students actively use them. Here are some of the students' comments on the difficulties of reception/accumulation of information in a foreign language:

Ну как-то попробовал, но у меня не получается пока на ходу прямо сразу информацию на английском языке. ...То есть вот у нас как привыкли: разговаривают все медленно, там все разжевывают. А там прямо вот говорят, говорят, говорят, говорят. И бывает не понимаю вообще о чем речь.

Well, I have tried [to watch video in English], but it is difficult for me to understand the information in English yet. ... For example, here they are in a habit to speak slowly, to explain everything. But there they talk, talk, talk, talk. And sometimes I don't understand at all what it is all about. (Aleksandr, school B, 14.10.2010)

...люди, которые изначально говорят на иностранных языках, они говорят быстро это, и не всегда получается усвоить все. Ну и опять же диалектами там. Они... не понимаем мы их. Нужна практика опять же.

...people, for whom the foreign language is a mother tongue, they speak quickly, and you do not always understand everything. Besides, they speak dialects. They ... we don't understand them. It requires more practice. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

These comments indicate that the foreign language used in class is different from the same language in real situations; there is more variety in it in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Moreover, the flow of speech might be much faster. As a result, a person might feel reluctant to perform this activity in a foreign language:

Просто не могу уловить и быстро надоедает.

I just can't follow, and quickly get tired of it. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Information in the written form might present no less difficulty due to the number of unknown words and absence of visual picture which is helpful in understanding the meaning of video. Therefore, a person has to spend much more time to understand the meaning of the information in a foreign language than to understand the same information in Russian:

Нет, ну просто иногда какой-нибудь сайт на английском языке, сидишь, переводишь. Ну, все равно читаешь на английском, что-то сам понимаешь, что-то с книжкой, со словарем.

Well, sometimes, if it is a site in the English language, you are sitting and translating. You read it in English anyway; you can understand something yourself, other things with a book, a dictionary. (Natalia, school B, 16.10.2010)

It is apparent that the level of proficiency operates as a much more significant factor in reception/accumulation of information than, for example, in communication. Unlike communication, where a person can adjust the conversation to his/her level of proficiency, the information, a person gets, has a fixed form. Besides, it is not always possible to sort out information in order to get information corresponding to the attained level of proficiency. As

a result, a person might get incomplete understanding which is a serious limitation because the goal of the action is to comprehend the information.

In sum, extra time and effort necessary for carrying out this type of foreign language use activity makes it less attractive in comparison with the same activity carried out in Russian. As one of the students put it:

Но как-то все равно приятнее на родном языке.

Well, somehow it is more pleasant [to read news] in Russian. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

This comment deserves special attention. It is not just reluctance to use extra effort that might hinder performance, but pursuit to carry out activities in the most effective way that underlie the operation of most kinds of human activity. From this it follows that unless a person has no choice but to use the source in English or attaches value to English language knowledge and skills as cultural capital, a person would prefer to receive or accumulate information in Russian because it is the most optimal way.

The last type of foreign language use activity to be considered is entertainment, which are activities that give pleasure and are to a greater degree associated with rest than other leisure activities. I am going to focus on such activities as listening to songs in a foreign language and watching films, cartoons, etc. in a foreign language.

The former kind of activity is widely spread among young people. Presumably, many songs they listen to are in the English language. These are some of the examples of this kind of foreign language use activity:

Но, в основном, там музыку слушаю и пытаюсь понять. Конечно, не обходится без переводов в Интернете...

I mainly listen to music [in the Internet] and try to understand. Naturally, I also have to look for translations in the Internet. (Andrei, school B, 16.10.2010)

Вот я, например, услышала песню... Если она мне очень нравится... У меня там, не знаю, в телефоне веб-страницы сохранены с текстами, и я то есть... Мне кажется, у меня уже какое-то даже произношение там вот... Они там поют... и я им подпеваю.

For example, I have listened to a [foreign] song... If I like it very much... I have saved web-pages with the lyrics in my phone, and I... I think I have already acquired pronunciation... They sing ... and I sing with them. (Svetlana, school C, 20.10.2010)

Вот которая песня мне интересна, я... то есть там и слова, и перевод сразу. И я просто учу этот текст. Потом начинаю понимать о чем, как, где какое слово.

If the song is interesting for me, then I... There are both lyrics and translation [in the Internet]. So I learn this text. And then I can understand what it is about, recognize the words. (Irina, school B, 14.10.2010)

We can see from these examples that listening to songs can serve as a way not only to maintain foreign language knowledge, but to broaden knowledge as well. However, the limitation of this kind of foreign use activity is that listening to songs might involve only listening to music without understanding the words and it is completely up to a person to study the words or not. The following comment supports this statement:

Просто тоже зависит, если интересно тебе, ты будешь смотреть, искать что-то... если нет, так тебе все равно.

It depends, if a person is interested, he will look for, search for something ... if not, then he won't do anything. (Aleksei, school A, 15.10.2010)

It is also noteworthy that listening to songs is not enough to obtain proficiency in a foreign language due to the specific characteristics of the language used in lyrics.

The latter kind of foreign language use activity dealing with entertainment like watching films, cartoons, etc. in a foreign language was rather scarcely represented. Few students perform this activity. As one of the students explained:

Вот фильм у меня была практика смотреть на английском языке. Интересно, но смысл не очень улавливается.

I have had an experience of watching a film in the English language. Interesting, but I had difficulty understanding the language. (Tatiana, school D, 22.10.2010)

Evidently, the level of proficiency is also an issue in this kind of activity. And even though in some films there might not be so much speech employed, as a rule, language performs a significant function in conveying the meaning. Lack of understanding or misunderstanding of

what is going on in a film considerably reduces the enjoyment from this activity and might result in abandonment of this activity.

Subtitles could be of much help in this case. However, Russian people are not used to watch films with subtitles as all the foreign films are dubbed. Indeed, few students have tried to watch films in English with subtitles.

Furthermore, reading subtitles is considered as extra strain and more associated with learning activity, i.e. work, rather than a form of leisure activity. Thus, when I asked one student if there should have been films in English with subtitles on television, she responded:

Я думаю, если все полностью фильмы, то это, наверное, все-таки будет очень тяжело, хотя по крайней мере, старшему поколению, которые не имеют возможности, например, его учить. Им даже времени, например, не хватает. Но если был, например, какой-то специальный канал, где бы шли только такие фильмы, мне кажется, это было бы здорово. В плане вот именно обучения, допустим. Для подростков, для молодежи.

I think, if all films [are in English], it will probably be very difficult, at least for the older generation, who don't have any opportunity to learn it. They don't have time for it. But if, for instance, there were a special channel with only such films, that, in my opinion, would be great. For learning purposes, for example. For teenagers, for young people. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

However, this student remarked that not even every young person would watch this channel:

Наверное, разделилась бы 50 на 50, я думаю. ...половина, может быть, даже чуть побольше, смотрела бы вот эти стандартные фильмы, переводные. То есть, если не хочется думать, ты пришел с той же учебы вечером, то да. Но если вот как-то собраться, чтобы именно, для того, кто хочет выучить английский хорошо, я думаю, те бы смотрели этот канал.

It would be 50x50, I suppose. ...half, maybe even more, would watch these standard films, which have been dubbed. For example, when you do not want to think, when you have come [home] in the evening from your studies. But if a person gathers himself up, especially the one who wants to learn English well, I think such people would watch this channel. (Elena, school A, 13.10.2010)

We can conclude then that watching films with or without subtitles requires extra effort and undermines the feeling of rest and pleasure which is the main goal of the actions that constitute entertainment activity. Nevertheless, a person might still perform this type of

foreign language use activity in spite of the possible limitations if s/he attaches value to English language knowledge as cultural capital.

Conclusion

First and foremost, it should be noted that while learning activity is regarded successful when a certain level of proficiency is attained, for use activity it is the amount of this activity which counts.

On the basis of the factors that might hinder performing certain activities in a foreign language, I can conclude that unlike learning activity where the teacher and the student share responsibility for the performance of the activity, foreign language use activity is the sole responsibility of the student.

The analysis has demonstrated that economic capital attributed to foreign language knowledge in certain contexts can significantly influence involvement of a student into foreign language learning activity. However, in general, broader context (the town context, the country context, etc.) has indirect influence on the learning activity in the school context. It is to a much greater degree determined by the immediate learning context where the teacher plays a significant role.

It has been shown that cultural capital might significantly influence the implementation of the foreign language use activity. Cultural capital, in its turn, is formed not only under the influence of the immediate context but to a large degree under the influence of the country context. It explains why the country context figures prominently in determining the extent of foreign language use activity. This argument is also supported by the results of the data analysis which have not showed any clear correlation between the type of school and the amount of foreign language use activity conducted by the students.

Let me now mention some key issues related to the influence of the Russian context on the English language acquisition activity of the students.

As it has been shown above, economic capital associated with English language knowledge and skills motivates a student to get actively involved in the learning activity, whereas for the use activity it is cultural capital that motivates a student to perform activities in a foreign language. However, the specific characteristics of the context determine the possibilities of realization of certain types of capital which has implications for the performance of each type of activities.

I have argued that cultural capital is present to a very low degree in the Russian context. As a result, in many cases acquisition of the English language is reduced to the learning activity. Furthermore, limited opportunities to use English as economical capital decreases the number of students motivated to make extra efforts in order to attain high proficiency in the English language. Moreover, the opposition between the near and far points in time when economic capital can be realized, turns in the Russian context into the opposition between a real and an abstract possibility to realize economic capital which often results in low involvement in the learning activity.

7. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Due to the nature of foreign language acquisition as a time-consuming and effort-taking activity, it is important for a person to have a strong reason for performing this activity. Consequently, capital, i.e. value, associated with foreign language knowledge and skills has turned out to be a useful concept in analysing relationship between the context and the activity aimed at foreign language acquisition. It is argued that the context exerts influence on foreign language acquisition activity through capital. Since the possibilities for realization of capital are different in various contexts, the activity aimed at foreign language acquisition varies from context to context.

Furthermore, foreign language acquisition consists of two distinct types of activities: foreign language learning activity and foreign language use activity. Different levels of context and different types of capital are pertinent to each of these activities. Foreign language learning activity is determined by the immediate learning context where the teacher figures prominently, with economic capital as the most influential impetus for the activity. Whereas foreign language use activity is to a large degree determined by the country context, with cultural capital as the most influential impetus for the activity.

The analysis has demonstrated that in certain conditions the transition from one activity to another might not happen. From this follows that it is important to design learning programmes so that they take into account the different nature of the activities that constitute foreign language acquisition and help establish and maintain a bridge between these two types of activities. In other words, a foreign language studies course should necessarily involve both learning and use activities. This will ensure that use activity will take place, which means that acquisition process will continue, even after formal learning activity stops. Moreover, employment of activities bound with foreign language use in the studies course might help make the process of foreign language acquisition more fascinating.

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Sites:

Council of Europe

<http://www.coe.int/>

MESRF (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation)

<http://eng.mon.gov.ru/>

Rosstat (Federal Service of State Statistics of the Russian Federation)

<http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat/rosstatsite.eng/>

PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe)

<http://assembly.coe.int/defaultE.asp>

WEF (World Economic Forum)

<http://www.weforum.org/>

WTO (World Trade Organization)

<http://www.wto.org/>

Official Data Portal of the Unified State Exam

<http://www.ege.edu.ru/>

Table 4.1**Resident population**

(mln. persons)

Years	Total population,	of which		As percentage of total population	
		urban	rural	urban	rural
1989	147.0	108.0	39.0	73	27
1993 ²⁾	148.6	108.7	39.9	73	27
1996 ²⁾	148.3	108.3	40.0	73	27
2001 ²⁾	146.3	107.1	39.2	73	27
2002					
as of January 1 ²⁾	145.6	106.7	38.9	73	27
as of October 9 ³⁾	145.2	106.4	38.8	73	27
2003	145.0	106.3	38.7	73	27
2004	144.2	105.8	38.4	73	27
2005	143.5	104.7	38.8	73	27
2006	142.8	104.1	38.7	73	27
2007	142.2	103.8	38.4	73	27
2008	142.0	103.8	38.2	73	27
2009	141.9	103.7	38.2	73	27
2010	141.9	103.7	38.2	73	27

¹⁾ Data are given: for 1989 - according to the population census as of January 12, for 1993, 1996, 2001-2010 - estimation as of January 1 of corresponding year.

²⁾ Population size is adjusted according to the results of the All-Russia population census 2002.

³⁾ In accordance with data of the All-Russia population census of 2002.

Rosstat (2010): *Russia in Figures*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b10_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/05-01.htm

Table 4.2

Number of trips of foreign citizens to Russia by purpose of travel in 2010 (from far abroad countries):
(thou. visits)

	Total	including by purpose				
		business	tourism	private	transit	service staff ¹⁾
Number of trips - total	8266	3035	2025	2174	49	983
including from countries:						
Finland	1013	519	139	292	2	62
Estonia	475	342	35	65	2	31
China	747	203	158	258	1	126
Lithuania	759	377	23	282	1	77
Germany	611	167	347	51	11	35
Latvia	569	357	34	104	1	73
Poland	395	308	26	18	1	42
USA	262	62	162	27	0.6	11
United kingdom (Great Britain)	213	63	127	13	0.4	10
Italy	198	53	123	14	0.2	7
France	194	61	94	24	0.4	14
Turkey	196	77	56	16	1	46
Mongolia	157	13	11	91	10	33
Spain	111	11	87	8	1.0	4
Israel	100	12	59	28	0.7	0.7
Democratic People's Republic of Korea	91	14	43	13	6	16
Netherlands	81	28	35	7	0.3	11
Japan	78	22	42	8	1	4
Austria	68	27	28	6	0.1	7
India	53	15	10	11	0.5	18
Sweden	54	21	22	8	0.2	3

¹⁾ Drivers of motor vehicles and crews of sea and river ships, aircraft crews, railway transport crews.

Rosstat (2011): *Russia in Figures*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b11_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/10-13.htm

Table 4.3**International migration**

(persons)

	1997	2000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Departures from the Russian Federation, total	232987	145720	79795	69798	54061	47013	39508	32458
of which to:								
CIS countries ¹⁾	146961	82312	37017	36109	35262	31329	26114	20326
Azerbaijan	4302	3187	1336	1274	1366	1355	1258	1130
Armenia	2578	1519	654	620	686	728	1032	983
Belarus	18928	13276	5671	6034	6318	5302	3954	2573
Georgia ²⁾	3286	1802	740	691	593	603	572	...
Kazakhstan	25364	17913	12504	12437	11948	10211	7483	7232
Kyrgyzstan	6296	1857	656	473	605	668	648	674
Republic of Moldova	5715	2237	907	786	636	629	551	648
Tajikistan	2474	1158	549	434	424	464	637	610
Turkmenistan	1532	676	168	125	112	111	90	62
Uzbekistan	7370	3086	717	595	648	722	948	677
Ukraine	69116	35601	13115	12640	11926	10536	8941	5737
far abroad countries ³⁾	86026	63408	42778	33689	18799	15684	13394	12132
Australia	297	176	167	209	167	139	202	172
Afghanistan	146	25	2	11	11	12	16	11
Bulgaria	668	180	160	124	116	132	163	125
Germany	48363	40443	31876	21458	8229	6486	4916	4115
Greece	886	314	157	155	139	116	98	80
Israel	12873	9407	1733	1745	1408	1202	1040	894
Canada	1333	841	783	628	552	571	516	457
China	1222	658	154	456	196	56	53	57
Cuba	89	27	8	2	3	5	6	5
Latvia	636	365	226	211	223	271	226	167
Lithuania	1162	376	282	213	228	276	215	173
Poland	376	135	57	76	84	77	101	74
Syrian Arab Republic	256	54	55	54	42	38	24	24
USA	9087	4793	2919	4040	3109	2108	1722	1440
Turkey	356	104	60	85	78	78	81	101
Finland	923	1142	910	737	695	692	620	685
Sweden	151	195	158	110	132	137	157	102
Estonia	702	385	265	225	270	280	301	223
other countries	6500	3788	2806	3150	3117	3008	2937	3227

¹⁾ Data for 2009 are given excluding Georgia.²⁾ Georgia left the CIS in August of 2009. Un 2009 from Georgia to Russia arrived 7454 persons, from Russia to Georgia departed 629 persons.³⁾ Data for 2009 are given including Georgia.

Rosstat (2010): *Russia in Figures*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b10_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/05-09.htm

Table 4.4

Number of trips of Russian citizens abroad by purpose of travel in 2010 (to far abroad countries)
(thou. departures)

	Total	including by purpose			
		business	tourism	private	service staff ¹⁾
Number of trips - total	25487	1133	12231	10188	1936
including to countries:					
Finland	3386	161	709	2077	439
Turkey	3012	37	2368	466	141
Egypt	2540	7	2198	226	109
China	2284	353	1440	295	195
Estonia	1495	25	12	1404	54
Germany	1002	105	471	368	59
Lithuania	714	41	58	497	118
Italy	583	21	451	77	34
Spain	518	9	411	70	27
Greece	485	3	387	67	28
Poland	457	18	43	355	41
France	348	33	223	69	23
Czech Republic	377	17	268	78	14
Thailand	527	2	465	36	24
United Arab Emirates	341	11	287	31	13
Bulgaria	332	4	263	48	17
Israel	283	5	185	75	18
United Kingdom (Great Britain)	242	28	120	77	18
Latvia	248	37	73	120	19
Cyprus	273	4	234	21	14
Austria	222	18	58	136	11

¹⁾ Drivers of motor vehicles and crews of sea and river ships, aircraft crews, railway transport crews.

Rosstat (2011): *Russia in Figures*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 25 August, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b11_12/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d01/10-14.htm

Table 4.5

The number of teachers of the day time educational establishments of the Russian Federation, 1st October, 2002
(thou. persons)

	The number of teachers	The number of vacant positions
The teachers of foreign languages	133,0	4,6
The teachers of the Russian language and literature	205,9	1,0
The teachers of mathematics	167,0	0,9
The teachers of geography	55,5	0,5
The teachers of biology	57,8	0,4

Rosstat (2003): *Education in Russia*. [Electronic Version] Retrieved 10 November, 2011 from http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b03_33/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d010/i011300r.htm

Appendix 1: List of students

School A

1. Anna, 13.10.2010
2. Elena, 13.10.2010
3. Aleksei, 15.10.2010

School B

1. Aleksandr, 14.10.2010
2. Irina, 14.10.2010
3. Andrei, 16.10.2010
4. Natalia, 16.10.2010

School C

1. Svetlana, 20.10.2010
2. Pavel, 20.10.2010
3. Roman, 20.10.2010

School D

1. Tatiana, 22.10.2010
2. Sergei, 22.10.2010
3. Vladimir, 22.10.2010

Appendix 2: Consent form

I, _____, understand that I will be a participant in Olga Mukhina's research project on the factors that influence foreign language proficiency of students.

I also understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that if I feel it necessary, I may discontinue the interview at any time.

Taking into account all that has been said above, I, _____, agree to give you, Olga Mukhina, my interview, trusting that all information shall be kept strictly confidential.

Appendix 3: Interview guide

1. Is it important to learn foreign languages?
2. What foreign language would you choose to learn, in case you didn't know any foreign languages?
3. What other languages are important to know?
4. Which foreign language would you like to learn?
5. What do you usually do during the lesson?
6. What kind of activity do you like to perform at the lesson?
7. Would you like to change anything about the lesson?
8. In what way does the teaching method influence the learning process?
9. What do you think of the textbooks you use?
10. How much time do you spend to learn the English language?
11. How many English lessons a week should there be?
12. Have you got any difficulties in learning the language?
13. What aspects of language is it important to pay attention in the first place?
14. What is the best way to learn the language?
15. Would you take an extra course to improve the level of proficiency in English if you were offered a place at it?
16. What can be done to keep the acquired level of proficiency when the studies course is over?
17. What role does the Internet play in learning the language?
18. Is it necessary to know foreign language to use the Internet?
19. Where do you use the English language?
20. How do you use the English language?
21. Have you ever talked to a foreigner?
22. Have you ever travelled abroad? / Did you speak English?
23. Do you have friends abroad?
24. Will your future profession require proficiency in English?
25. Would you like to work in an international company?
26. Would you like to study/live abroad?
27. Does your teacher ever say anything about the importance of learning the English language?
28. Do your parents speak English? Do they speak other languages?
29. Do your parents influence you in any way in regard to the English language?
30. What is the attitude to English among your friends?
31. Are there many among your friends who can speak English well?
32. If you came to a foreign country, would you learn the language of this country?
33. Do Russian people speak English well?
34. Is there any tendency in the level of English language proficiency in Russia?
35. Do you ever hear a foreign language on TV?
36. Should there be foreign languages on TV?
37. Have you ever heard high-ranking politicians, officials or businessmen speak English?
38. Do you ever hear a foreign language in the street?
39. Should the English language subject be a part of the obligatory graduation exam?
40. Should any courses in higher education be taught in English?
41. What advantages will you get if you learn the English language well?